Hugh McManners

# FALKLANDS COMMANDO

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# Annotation

The first-hand account of one special forces team's operations in the Falklands War in 1982. The book covers: preparation and departure; at sea; planners and hoaxers; Ascension Island; and HMS Intrepid in bomb alley.


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# Preface to the e-book edition

Having written a new Introduction for this new e-book edition of *Falklands Commando*, I decided to keep the Introductions to my original 1984 edition of this book, and also that for the 2001 edition. This is unusual. But *Falklands Commando* was written 30 years ago, and re-printed three times over a period of history in which the world has moved from the deadlock of nuclear war, into the dangerous world of nuclear proliferation and asymmetric warfare.

My own perspective has changed just as fundamentally, from professional soldier, to erstwhile journalist, and now author running an Oxford University medical research foundation into the neuroscience of soldiers' post-combat problems.

You can of course just skip the introductions and go directly to the beginning of Chapter 1 of the book.

If moved to investigate the evolution of the various military issues I discuss here over these crucial decades – or indeed my personal feelings and perspectives, read on.

Some maps and illustrations are included in this e-book at appropriate points of the text. You can also access them via the index in the Maps and Illustrations section.

# Introduction to the original edition (1984)

I write from a second-floor room (overlooking the cricket square) of The Staff College at Camberley. Tucked away from the bustle of the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, behind green lawns and trees, its marbled halls are lined with paintings of moustached generals and glass cases displaying the now threadbare service uniforms worn by famous men in history-book battles. The columns around the central gallery are engraved with the names of the dead of half-forgotten wars in unpronounceable places – carefully annotated 'died of wounds', 'died of sickness' or 'killed in action'. These battles would have been long over by the time the news of their outcome (and indeed the news that they had ever happened at all) had reached the outside world.

Two years after the day when the Argentine 'Buzo Táctico' (a company of their marine commandos) landed at Mullet Creek in East Falkland (2 April 1982) my memories of the extraordinary four months that followed are fresh, some of them deeply etched. Yet the whole episode stands apart from anything else.

The usual merging of events and experiences, putting them into context, does not seem to be possible with my memories of the Falklands saga. I suspect that this phenomenon is widespread: an inability to associate the geographical isolation of those islands and the political problem they now represent with the national fervour generated over their occupation and recapture in 1982. Other nations shared in this excitement and yet today talk disparagingly about the wisdom of sending our Task Force for so little material gain. Even some of our own people do this. The question of principle seems to have been forgotten.

It was such a singular event, emerging seemingly from nowhere. For us as participants, the stability of day-to-day life with its routines and mild excitements, the world seemed suddenly to go mad.

Then just as suddenly it was all over.

The time from when the Argentine commandos threw phosphorus grenades into the Royal Marine Barracks at Moody Brook until three days later when the Task Force set sail, was a period of intense preparation and chaos. It was not clear what the Task Force was going to do – indeed some thought we would simply float around for a while and then come home. Once at sea the pace eased off into an expectant lethargy, time being occupied in training and listening to the World News. As with most other people's experience of war, it was boring and uncomfortable – but above all worrying.

Once hostilities began with the capture of South Georgia on 25 April and then the naval battle (the sinking of the *Belgrano* on 2 May and the successful Exocet attack on HMS *Sheffield* on 4 May), a dreadful sort of momentum developed as we all concentrated on the tasks that we were going to have to perform. The lethargy completely evaporated. Everyone was screwed up with tension, and events seemed to follow on rapidly.

As this is a real story, the exciting bits happen too suddenly (and sometimes too often) for a well-constructed plot. They are separated by periods of boredom made worse by the uncomfortable conditions and the continual gnawing worry. As far as we were concerned, once 3 Commando Brigade was safely ashore the outcome was decided. It was simply a question of when the 'Argies' would see sense and give up. So for us the end came with little real drama, as a tired and foregone conclusion which had been dragged out for several weeks.

The Argentine surrender was not a sudden relief either. It introduced a completely new set of problems, and left us stuck eight thousand miles from home. In short, as a story it has disadvantages of timing and plot.

When compared with the battles carved in marble around the balconied foyer of the Staff College, there are many differences and some similarities. It all happened far from home – a part of the world that many people thought was nearer Scotland than South America. The distance was the maximum that any scenario could dream up (given Earth geography) for an amphibious group to cover without a friendly port. The speed at which the operation was mounted is unparalleled and it was all over extraordinarily quickly.

Modern communications meant that the commanders on the spot (land commander Brigadier Thompson and the naval Task Force commander Rear-Admiral Woodward, then later, when 5 Brigade joined us, divisional Major-General Moor) spoke daily to overall commander Admiral Fieldhouse at the Northwood joint HQ. Admiral Fieldhouse spoke daily by the Prime Minister and her small War Cabinet, with all the risks of micro-management that entailed.

This was in contrast to the Boer War, when military news took weeks to arrive, so the commanders simply got on with fighting their battles.

Although distance and the lack of independent means of transmitting the stories meant that the media had less of an influence than in other recent wars, this was not so for the men of the Task Force. We were avid consumers of media conjecture – from of out-of-date newspapers and the World Service of the BBC. Interest in the political manoeuvrings early on was keen and morale fluctuated according to how the media viewed the progress of diplomatic talks.

When diplomacy failed and the war started, lurid headlines in some papers made us uncomfortable – and some made us angry.

The retired armchair admiral pundits who pontificated on television news programmes, and in newspaper columns, were products of peacetime, with no war experience. Their sometimes wildly inaccurate pronouncements were amusing, but when they started to get it right (for instance discussion about the impending attack on Darwin and Goose Green, on the very evening that the Paras were sweating through the bogs and tussock grass of Laguna Legna for a surprise night attack) it seemed insensitive and indiscreet. Of course they were guessing – just as the Argentinians could guess. Indeed their conjecture might have helped to give an impression of another diversionary raid (D Squadron SAS had raided Darwin on the night of the San Carlos Landings). However, that interpretation is really too charitable, as that night the Argentine garrison at Goose Green was reinforced by helicopter.

This sort of thing made us feel very isolated. It also made us feel a little bitter – that we could not rely on our own countrymen, in warm television studios, to be reticent on our behalf.

The generals whose names are carved in marble in the galleried entrance hall at Staff College Camberley led armies that died as much from sickness as from enemy action. In those days, military medical science was rudimentary. Men would more often die from wounds than recover.

However in the South Atlantic the medical services were superb. No one died of sickness, despite the dreadful climate and living conditions. Astonishingly, every man who made it alive to the Main Dressing Station at Ajax Bay (nicknamed the 'Red and Green Life Machine') survived in spite of the horrible wounds that the far more powerful modern weapons inflict. The surgeons attributed this to the very high standard of physical fitness of the wounded soldiers, and their will to survive. The superb skill and dedication of the medical staff, often dead tired, is the other half of this story.

Unlike in Vietnam, where soldiers were only minutes by helicopter from the most modern hospitals, Falklands wounded had to lie out, often for hours, before helicopters could get to them. Medical training on the voyage south enabled their mates to keep them alive during this waiting. Every man knew basic major-road-accident-type first aid – techniques for stopping massive bleeding, external heart massage, mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and putting up drips, either intravenous of intra-rectal, introducing a new cry on the modern battlefield: 'Medic, Medic…for god's sake shove it up my arse!'

Afterwards, in the comfort of normal surroundings with time to reflect, Operation Corporate (as the whole operation was termed)

seems like a dream that happened to other people. It was like stepping through a looking glass – but once on the other side there was no guarantee of getting back. The first time I allowed myself to think realistically of getting back home was a few days before the Argentine surrender, but even then I did not count on it until I was in the comfort and warmth of HMS *Intrepid* watching video films of Wimbledon.

I have not felt inclined to philosophise – I don't think warfare lends itself to that. It is cruel, unfair and brutal. Human nature sadly makes wars inevitable and so, when forced to fight them, soldiers must be resolute and ruthless and the experts at their trade, to get them over with as fast as possible.

Exposure to violence has a deadening effect on emotions and as my story unfolds this becomes apparent. Loyalties within my own little group become more important than anything else. A sort of weariness envelops everyone, a phenomenon that can only truly be understood by those who have been involved in wars. Clear moral distinctions become blurred and people move with tired resolution through one sad and violent crisis to the next. Strangely there are also unique moments of clarity, of comradeship and joy of living, which can only exist in contrast with the discomfort and danger. It is a triumph of the human spirit that men are able to live through wars without becoming barbaric and losing their moral values. If only we did not have to go and fight them.

I wrote this book as a 'worm's eye view', without the benefit of hindsight. My aim is to convey the flavour of life below decks and in the mountains, and my impressions of a small slice of the war. I hope that my comrades at arms will find the variations between their memories of events described and mine interesting rather than irritating. (No two people ever remember the same thing in the same way.)

For several months after I got back from the South Atlantic I was somewhat of an oddity. It took time to readjust to normal life. Such was the interest in the campaign that new acquaintances were unable to resist asking the question 'What was it like?' A brief answer to that simple question would take at least an hour. Military people kept telling me how lucky I was to have gone south and been a part of it all.

Some of Operation Corporate was boring. For much of the time I did not know exactly what was going on and everything had a backdrop of worry and discomfort. There is a fair amount in the story that has to be explained to the reader in preparation for when the action starts. In addition I have tried to show how we enlivened the boredom and coped with the anxiety, fear and sadness.

Although primarily for the friends who were perceptive and kind enough not to ask, this book is also an answer to the question “What was it like?”. But the real answer is very short. Operation Corporate was like nothing else at all. Furthermore, I do not count myself lucky to have gone south, but lucky to have come home afterwards when so many did not. But now I’m home safely I would not exchange my 1982 April ‘break’ with anyone.

The book is also for Nick Allin, Des Nixon, Steve Hoyland and Tim Bedford who are in the story throughout, even though I do not manage to work them in as often as they deserve. They kept me on the rails and I very much enjoyed being with them – in spite of the terrible world outside.

*The Staff College*

*Camberley*

*February 1984*

# Introduction to the reprint edition (2001)

*Falklands Commando* could never have been published by a serving officer today. Along with being the first Falklands book written by a combatant, it is probably the first to be published while a student at Staff College Camberley – a dubious 'record' that I'm pretty sure has never been equalled…

*Falklands Commando* was in many ways, the initiator of the 'Special Forces book syndrome' which has plagued the MoD ever since. But it was published into a very different, and in some ways more rational world. Up until the SAS' Iranian Embassy siege rescue operation in 1980, the Regiment enjoyed the privacy of public disinterest, with no more than half a dozen Special Forces books published. This changed overnight as television news footage of the hostage rescue established the current voracious journalistic appetite for all things SAS. Around 30 Special Forces books were published in the 1980s. Then after the Gulf War between 1991 and 1996, around 80 books were written about SAS operations, 15 of them in 1996 alone.

Like *Falklands Commando,* these books were autobiographical, written by members of the Special Forces while their memories of the campaign were fresh, and not by senior commanders – with the one exception. Critics say that SAS general Sir Peter de la Billière started the avalanche of damaging Special Forces literature, by revealing details of SAS operations in the Gulf War in his *Desert Command* memoir. The former SAS Commanding Officer Brigadier Andy Massey joined Sir Peter in the MoD doghouse after appearing in a BBC four-part documentary series on the Gulf War, and then indulging in a spot of newspaper article writing. Another officer, writing under the pen name of Captain James Rennie, upset the brass hats by publishing an interesting but comparatively sober book about undercover Intelligence Corps operations in Northern Ireland. There was a similar book, but more lively and I thought evocative, book by a female intelligence operator.

And so a host of recently retired SAS men, aided and abetted by their ghost writers, agents and excited publishers, rushed into print claiming that the general had set a precedent. The MoD went into freefall, banning authors from seeing their mates at the SAS' base in Hereford – but running shy of extending castigation and bans to Gulf War hero Sir Peter and the other two renegade Army officers. The media had a field day, the books were published and their authors

damned – as if they cared. US Special Forces joked that typing and world processing skill were a vital part of SAS Selection.

Since 1996, the MoD has tried to stamp out this unwelcome literary genre, through contracts and exclusion orders that seek to make SF authors *persona non grata*. The MoD makes every member of UK Special Forces sign a gagging contract agreeing not to divulge anything about their work. If they subsequently write books, they can be sued for any money they might make as an author, as well as be prosecuted under Official Secrets legislation. If a book about Special Forces is published today, the Ministry of Defence would almost certainly slap on a High Court ban and sue the author for breach of contract. If the author is a serving Army officer, he would be court martialled, and face imprisonment, heavy fines, and the ruination of his military career. If the author goes through the proper channels and submits his manuscript for MoD clearance, as happened to a friend of mine writing responsibly and sensibly about the military aspect of news coverage of Special Forces activities, he or she would be slapped on the wrist for being so presumptuous (black marks being inserted into their confidential "P" file), and ordered not to show the hard-wrought manuscript to anybody else.

Meanwhile in the outside world, the public continue to soak up much-hyped books by 'SAS authors'. At best the public are reading books ghosted by professional thriller writers who know how to spin out a good yarn. At worst they are reading some very tall tales indeed, by people who were never badged members of the Special Forces, or indeed in the case of at least one particular best-selling author, had invented both their SAS credentials and the extraordinarily damaging events they said they had been involved with.

*Falklands Commando* escaped the nightmare of civil service interference and military censure solely because of the support of the then Director of Army Public Relations, now recently retired Inspector of Her Majesties Prisons, Baron the Lord David Ramsbotham.

During the actual fighting of the Falklands war, the MoD's desire to control the public's understanding of events was far more intense. Their media campaign was flawed, many mistakes were made, and David Ramsbotham had struggled with senior Civil Servants to establish a sensible system by which journalists could be handled fairly. But even though some lessons were learned, which helped in the Gulf War nine years later, relationships between the media and the MoD (and the over-arching government media handling machine) have remained fraught with suspicion, dishonesty and anger. This is a serious, unnecessary and unworthy problem, which will seriously affect future military operations.

Even now, in 2002, twenty years and several large-scale

operations further on, the MoD's media handling department remains antagonistic to the media upon which it depends. In 1982, many UK journalists were strong supporters of the military, and we still had proper defence correspondents on our national newspapers, who'd taken years learning about the armed forces in order to report military matters accurately for a readership that was interested. (Today, only Michael Evans and Sean Rayment could be described as professional, long-term defence correspondents, and they are endangered species.)

But rather than help potentially co-operative journalists to acquire and file helpful stories, MoD civil servants tried to control the media, a fruitless effort during the Falklands War, fronted by the robotic-sounding Ian MacDonald – an unhelpful, deliberately pedantic spokesman. It was as though the MoD saw itself fighting two wars: one on the other side of the world against the Argentine forces, and the other closer to home. The MoD was just not understanding the reality of media life, that regardless of any other consideration, the pages and television time had to be filled. One of the colonels I worked with in the MoD on my return from the war (who is now a general), described Falklands War press conferences as if they were football riots: "The press came swarming in here every day demanding to know what was going on – *like vermin*." I know now, having degenerated into journalism myself for a time, that many of the British 'vermin' were well aware of the need for security, and would have written stories that were less damaging than many of the ones that were printed – or even just photographs, had the MoD been less autocratic, and worked to establish some good working relationships with particular people.

But the MoD's media department had already abdicated responsibility by treating the media as an enemy to be thwarted – their easiest and safest option. The top defence journalists were all down south with the Task Force, being obstructed by ignorant MoD media officers who controlled the only means of transmitting copy once written. It was left to severely pressurised military commanders to talk with journalists on the spot, and on various occasions to intervene to prevent the stories being hacked to pieces by the MoD minders before transmission back to London. The MoD's media department had no credibility with journalists, and so could do nothing to ameliorate the media coverage it was trying so hard to suppress.

Since the Falklands War, I've had the opportunity to see all this from the journalist's perspective, as the *Sunday Times* defence correspondent. Between 1995 and 2000, I reported Bosnia, the bombing of Baghdad and the Kosovo campaign. Since the Falklands war, satellite communications and other technological innovations

have made it possible for the media to report wars independently, without any official help, forcing the MoD to include television and press facilities as part of their operational plan. But the antagonism and mutual distrust remains the same.

However, unlike the rest of Whitehall, where civil servants can obfuscate, prevaricate, and mislead journalists with little direct danger to anybody else, the MoD's media department cannot afford to play the same game. A war is too important. The media *en masse* will drop everything else for a war – a real drama of life and death that affects every news consumer. Media coverage affects national morale very deeply, and can sway the electorate in their support for military action. Today's fighting troops, whose WAP phones, radios and miniature television sets keep them in contact with CNN, the BBC and ITN hour by hour, are also deeply affected. In recent campaigns, every military HQ has had at least one television set showing CNN round the clock. All too often, CNN gets the news out faster than the military's own battlefield information systems. The troops learn what's going on in their war at the same time as everybody else in the world.

There is no doubt that the wars of the future will increasingly be determined by media-led public opinion. But without an enormous (and depressingly unlikely) change of attitude, culture and perception by the MoD's media organisation, the battle for this all-important public opinion mandate will become increasingly more difficult for military commanders to win. I regard this as a military mandate, because once politicians have allowed diplomacy to degenerate into war, they must hand over the reins to their military commanders.

In addition, modern communications enable battles to be micro-managed from the other side of the world – from the White House, Pentagon, Downing Street or Main Building MoD. Politicians do not understand warfare, and are too easily swayed by public opinion to be resolute; hesitation kills the troops. This is a certain way to lose battles and the war. Margaret Thatcher's determination and resolution was unique, and enabled an improbable victory.

In the span of modern campaigns, the Falklands War was basic and brutal. Despite a huge array of modern technology, the war was won by exhausted soldiers with soaking wet clothing and bad feet, who walked across East Falkland to use bomb and bayonet on their enemy. But now, in the dawning years of the 21st century, we are becoming used to wars being won from the air, by bombers and smart missiles, with only the odd, often accidental casualty – the consequence of battlefield mistaken identity, minefields or a post-combat mix-up. Technology is supposed to spare us from the harrowing homecomings of body bags.

But judging from the wars fought by the USA and its allies against

Iraq and Serbia, this growing reliance upon technology, air power and a remote technological way of killing people, condemns innocent civilians in an almost totally one-sided battle. Our military theorists talk of 'asymmetric warfare', by which they mean small, often poorly-equipped forces like the Vietcong taking on massive, well-equipped forces like the US Army.

In that example, nicknamed 'the war of the flea', the flea beat the American rhino. But many military experts – particularly in the world's air forces – believe that technology can now enable wars to be fought remotely without mutually high levels of bloodshed. Asymmetric warfare is no longer the worrying spectre it used to be for hi-tech nations, its asymmetry referring now to a stark imbalance in casualty rates: the large numbers of low-tech 'baddies' plus innocent third world civilians on the receiving end, and a few accidental deaths on the high-tech side.

But I write this postscript just weeks after the appalling terrorist attacks of 11th September. The 'baddies' used smuggled craft knives with medieval barbarity, to force airline crews to ram skyscrapers, killing more 'high-tech' people than any previous terrorist attack in history. Predictably the US military relied yet again on its technology to bomb retribution upon Afghanistan. They look lucky – in that as I write, the Afghan leaders seem bent upon creating a stable country that will no longer give safe haven to terrorists.

It has become clear that behind all the President's Texas tough talk of "smokin' 'em out", the US military had only the one card up their sleeve – as ever the laser guided bombs, missiles, and World War Two high-altitude carpet bombing as delivered by our old favourites the B52s.

But in reality however, air strikes can only be at best a catalyst for change. It was local opposition to the Taliban, empowered by the activities of SAS and US Special Forces on the ground, who did the fighting and achieved the result. [*2014 note*: but then of course the campaign dragged on for another thirteen years. So much for air power…]

We cannot rely on technology to save us from having to fight and if necessary die for what we believe in. I fear that the 21st century will provide our military people with plenty of opportunities.

Asymmetric warfare is now developing new and more terrifying ways of striking back at rich, high-tech nations – for which the USA is prime target. The economic grievances of the less developed world must become the prime concern of prosperous nations, even if the solutions mean we have to give things up. Their grievances fuel the anger and hatred that creates international terrorism; and only when they are assuaged, can many-headed monsters like *Al Qaeda* and

*Islamic Jihad*, be strangled in their nests. It would be cheaper to bring trade and prosperity to the rest of the world, than to create the forces, doubtful security agencies, weapons and high tech solutions needed to fight an increasingly hopeless battle against fanatical enemies who are not going to go away.

Fighting a war against this ill-defined asymmetric enemy is very hard for the democracies, whose lawyers argue bitterly over anti-terror laws restricting civil rights, whose electorates will not tolerate military campaigns in which the body count grows too large. As we have already seen in the USA, the pressures on politicians to take revenge are enormous, even though this leads only to further terrorism. As I write, I am hoping that the USA and its allies will bring military-delivered aid to Afghanistan as part of the short term 'revenge' mission to arrest bin Laden – then continue providing aid as part of a long term, global strategy. [*2014 note*: instead they created Camp Bastion, a military town in the middle of nowhere, the size of Reading, and operations that cost far more than the expense of building a modern infrastructure that might create the sort of country-wide prosperity that might turn the people against the warlords.]

But just because we hand over billions of dollars in aid money, the terrorists themselves are not going to evaporate. They will continue operating, and as we have seen in Northern Ireland, positioning themselves so they can benefit financially, as local contractors or gangsters. Aid must be provided not as large cheques to line the pockets of government officials, but as well-organised, closely-supervised, long-term projects that will get the local economy creating wealth for itself and its people. And at the same time, the world's police, military and secret service agencies must use the widest range of techniques and tactics to root out terrorists. Technology has its part to play, but success can only be achieved by putting men and women onto the ground, and the risking of lives. And as is obvious, they must be properly equipped – with clothing and equipment that takes advantage of the most up-to-date technology.

Britain's armed forces are increasingly engaged in all manner of operations that are unpredictable and potentially very hazardous. They have also emerged from the most miserable period of moneysaving cuts, with the prospect of further serious budgetary difficulties not far over the horizon. Our Armed Forces are slimmed to the bone, with none of the slack needed either for formation training, or the unforeseen reinforcement of units already on operations. Service men and women are over-worked and morale is fragile.

Politicians and even some senior officers, resorting to self-congratulation to paper over cracks in the much presumed-upon morale of our armed forces, have correctly stated on various

occasions, that our troops are the best in the world (a truth better left unsaid – at least by us, in my opinion…).

But as our politicians enjoy the reflected glory of hard-won military success, these same politicians, senior officers and civil servants ignore the bathos that could so easily overwhelm the people who actually have to do the work and take the risks.

MoD officials will doubtless cite the various reorganisations and improvements that they would argue make my criticisms outdated. I have not however mentioned the state of the Forces' (particularly the Army's) medical services. We could not go to war and expect to cope with any predicted level of casualties without seriously affecting Britain's civilian National Health Service. General Sir Michael Rose, an SAS officer and Adjutant General (responsible for all personnel matters) who in Bosnia set much of the agenda for future military peace keeping operations, has already warned that though we assume our armed forces will continue to win wars, without radical changes (and more money), we must prepare ourselves for a serious military disaster, as our battle-winning troops cannot be expected to do it on their own indefinitely.

The SA-80 (L85A1) rifle saga is a typical and disgraceful example. Apart from boots, a soldiers' rifle is his (or her) most important piece of equipment. Boots and rifle, the rock-bottom fundamentals of any armed force – or so you might think. (I will forego telling the equally disgraceful history of the British Army's useless DMS boot.)

In the 1980s, many British soldiers wanted to use US-made M-16 rifles in preference to their heavy and mostly worn out SLRs, or the ineffective, old-fashioned and often dangerous SMGs, that were British Army standard issue personal weapons. I used the Colt Commando AR-15 variation of the M-16 during the Falklands War. An off-the-shelf buy of M-16s from the USA would have given us what we needed, and saved millions of pounds.

But to keep British arms manufacturing in business, the UK developed its own new rifle known as the SA-80 (of the NATO standard 5.56mm calibre, matching the M-16) at great cost. This took a very long time, and after the new weapon entered service, serious flaws were very quickly discovered. But presumably because it was hoped other countries might buy the new weapon, these flaws – a combination of fundamental design faults and shoddy manufacture – were ignored, despite well-informed and extensive media coverage of the problems.

Only when British troops went to war in the Gulf against Iraq and the media ran stories of SA-80 jamming in the desert sands, firing pins breaking and so on, was something done. At the same time, it was revealed that Britain's much-vaunted new Challenger tank (another

putative British defence industry money spinner) could not cope with desert conditions – the MoD had not bothered to purchase sand filters to protect Challengers' engines.

Millions were spent investigating SA-80's faults. Then in 2001, two decades after the SA-80 had been designed, and extensive modifications, the MoD announced that 'exhaustive trials' proved that SA-80 could finally be considered reliable. Fingers crossed, chaps – while the MoD's procurement chiefs offer their most earnest thanks for the good fortune that kept British Army line regiments from being sent to war during all those years. (I'm joking – MoD procurement chiefs don't actually care.)

But despite this and many other procurement disasters, nothing much has changed. In the large-scale military exercise in Saudi Arabia in autumn 2001, from which Special Forces troops were flown directly into the Taliban war in Afghanistan, many soldiers were not issued with proper desert uniforms and equipment. Their ordinary black combat boots, for example, got so hot that people's feet were burned.

The problem is one of perception verging on ignorance. The MoD's army of civil servants is greater in number than Britain's actual Army and twice the size of the Royal Navy and the RAF. They have their own peculiar perceptions. They inhabit bureaucratic enclaves in places like Bath and Whitehall, with very little contact with real troops, who live scattered across Britain in military towns like Catterick, Aldershot, Colchester and Warminster, on remote airbases in the Fens, or near ports like Plymouth, Rosyth and Portsmouth.

The MoD is one of the highest spending Departments of State. In peacetime, with no operations to reveal its flaws, the MoD's smooth functioning is the over-riding consideration – a pointless monolith like the 'Department of Administrative Affairs' that gave us so many laughs in the television comedy *Yes, Minister*.

There are no shortcuts here. If we really want a secure, peaceful world, we have to pay for it – not just in time, effort and money, but by using, and sometimes losing, the lives of dedicated men and women brave enough for such a commitment. These unique people: armed forces, secret service, police, fire and ambulance services… must be supported, equipped, paid decently and respected. And when their time of service is over, they must be helped back into normal life – particularly if they have been injured or affected by what they have had to do.

This was not understood before, during or after the Falklands, when a peacetime army went to war. We fought wearing boots that gave us trench foot, water-proofs we had bought with our own money from climbing stores, and heavy, outdated, low-tech radio equipment. And when we got home, there was no attempt to find out whether we

had been adversely affected by the experience.

As this book is published, from 1 March 2002, the MoD are to defend themselves in London's High Court, from being sued by some 1800 veterans of the Falklands, Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Gulf campaigns, all of whom have suffered psychological damage, but were not looked after as they should have been. This case has dragged on for years, with the MoD using every trick in the legal book to avoid addressing the very serious issues involved. The case will be a severe PR disaster for the MoD and the Treasury Solicitors, but nevertheless MoD insiders insist the alternatives as they see them are far worse. It's all about money. Having been forced to pay out millions to military females forced to leave the Services because of pregnancy, the potential for further MoD payouts are enormous, and the judgment will affect the veterans of other campaigns too.

The MoD has already attempted to subvert the arguments involved in this case by pouring scorn on a supposedly new 'blame' culture that they argue has created what they say are unreasonable legal claims. Senior officers have talked in the past of serious combat-related psychological conditions like depression and PTSD as 'compensationitis'.

But the March 2002 court case is nothing to do with whether or not soldiers should be compensated for being affected by combat. All military people, especially the supposedly litigant Falkland veterans, agree with the opposing MoD defence lawyers that experiencing combat is a reasonable expectation of anybody pursuing a military career. Indeed some of those litigants, plus others like me, would have been disappointed if their military careers had not included a few actual combat operations. At issue is not the adverse psychological effect of combat upon soldiers, which just like the more manifest physical injuries are well understood by the medical profession; but whether the MoD, and more particularly the Army took proper and responsible care of the psychological well-being of its combat soldiers before and after the fighting.

In a book I wrote in 1993, *The Scars of War*, I describe the way modern soldiers are affected by combat, and how despite the considerable body of medical knowledge in the area of post-combat psychology, many British war veterans are left to cope on their own with severe combat-related mental problems.

The book created an inevitable flurry of knee-jerk outrage from some of the old-school military, highlighted by one very strange, apoplectic (and wildly libellous) six page letter sent on open distribution to many very senior officers within the MoD. But the bombast died away rapidly as people actually read the book, which subsequently appeared on the official reading lists of the Army Staff

College and Royal Military Academy Sandhurst.

In particular, *The Scars of War* described how until the late 1980s and the Gulf War, the British Army's psychiatrists neglected both the education of troops into the likely psychological affects of combat, and the detection and consequent treatment of psychologically damaged soldiers. I ascribed this to the Army's overall lack of interest in what they then considered to be 'sideshow' conflicts (like the Falklands – "not a proper war" as one senior armoured corps officer told us at Staff College in 1984), which diverted attention from the Cold War and the British Army's prime role in maintaining an armoured impasse between the NATO and the Warsaw Pact in Central Europe.

In the High Court, the war veterans' case is that they should have been told what to expect, then been trained to identify symptoms and take basic remedial actions, and received proper psychiatric assessment and treatment afterwards – just as they would expect for physical injuries. If this had been done, the damaging effects of their experiences would have been mitigated, and many affected vets would now be able to function normally. Instead, lives have been ruined; families destroyed; tough, sane people have committed suicide, and many committed career Service men and women have quit when they actually wanted to stay.

This fundamental lack of care cannot be tolerated. In our terrible new, post 11 September world, we have only the people who risk their lives on our behalf to keep us all from the same darkness that engulfed the New York Trade Centre. If we do not insist that our people are properly treated, they will no longer come forward to do this work. And we will all be finished.

*Canterbury*

*Kent*

*2001*

# Introduction to the e-book edition (2014)

Young men fight our wars, while the old men stay at home and do all they can to remove the need for fighting. At least that's how it's supposed to be. Today's most senior politicians have no war experience, and seem at times to behave like the Grand Old Duke of York, deploying the troops with little understanding of what they're going to have to do. Then when the wars are won, thanking them by making defence cuts of their regiments, ships or squadrons.

I was a young man, so this book is an accurate account of what it was like for me and the other young men I had to privilege to work with. I'm now writing another book, looking back on this extraordinary war, and the aftermath of its demands and experiences on me and many others.

In being a young man's book, I ought also to add that it's not enhanced by the thrilleresque structure and prose that characterise more recent military books. Many of my fellow military authors are these days required by agents or commissioning editors to have their writings ghosted or 'heavily edited' by a professional writer. This is easy to spot, and I think a shame, as the way professional soldiers express themselves is far more interesting – if only editors had sufficient knowledge of our world to do it the justice it deserves.

The highlight of the Falklands 25th anniversary was a huge parade on Horse Guards. A simultaneous service of Remembrance broadcast from the War Graves cemetery at San Carlos on East Falkland was projected onto massive screens for us all to see. At the end, we marched down the Mall towards Buckingham Palace, along streets lined with well-wishers.

This was a once-in-a-lifetime experience of national recognition, and of belonging to something unique and very special. It was also oddly timeless.

After we'd marched down the Mall and were standing in three ranks outside Buckingham Palace, I imagined of what it must have been at a big battle like Waterloo. Waiting as always for something to happen (the Red Arrows to fly overhead), we made the timeless *sotto voce* conversation of soldiers packed shoulder-to-shoulder – mostly of absent friends. In addition to this, my generation of former Commandos discussed the benefits of motorised golf trolleys and the realities of arthritic knees, bad backs, and whether we'd still be around for the 50th anniversary.

The 30th anniversary wasn't quite as spectacular – coinciding as it did with the London Olympics. There were nevertheless reunions, and the funeral of my friend and fellow commando forward observer Peter Geary beside the sea at his wind-swept village in the glens of Antrim. Crammed into the kitchen of his cottage, overlooking Glenarm and its deserted port, Pete's military friends told impromptu stories of his exploits for Jackie his wife (and Pete's incredulous family) and for our own catharsis. All ranks were present, from brigadier downwards, but the majority were the soldiers Pete had commanded – commando gunners from his beloved 79 Kirkee Battery. The evening finished with a rendition of 79 Battery's disgraceful song 'The Pink Hotel' (which you can find on YouTube if you are so inclined).

Another 30th reunion was at Royal Marines Poole, where the current 148 Battery hosted former members from as far back in its history as its very beginnings in the Second World War. One of the surviving forward observers from D-Day was there, aided by walking sticks, comparing notes with guys recently returned from Afghanistan. I took up with people I hadn't seen for thirty years instantly, as if that had been just a week previously. I was glad to see them again in a way that is completely different to any other sort of reunion.

Although there was little talk of war or suffering, that was the backdrop – and justification – for the reunion. Although we veterans were no longer young, fit or strong enough to do the business any more, our still-operational comrades afforded us the same respect as they rightly did themselves. The current 148 Battery is very operational, and has suffered the recent deaths and serious injuries that are part of their heightened state of military capability. For them, operations are on-going – an ever-present likelihood that casts its strange and enervating shadow over life in a front line unit.

But, as the still-serving members of 148 Battery made clear, this strange shadow is the same for us all. Wars are not over when the last shell explodes, or when the last man arrives back home to his strained and thankful family. These are cataclysmic human events of great magnitude and resonance, casting their shadow across many more lives than ever were lost.

But I am always very careful not to describe this shadow as 'black', or as being in any way negative. Although it brings suffering, it can also bring life and an intensity of human relations and feelings that do not exist in normal life. For some, this intensity is addictive, creating post-combat problems. This phenomenon has prompted psychological studies into excessive risk-taking by war veterans. And there is also a large and complicated raft of psychological and neurological conditions that the intense stresses and violence of war visits on its survivors.

The strange goodness that exists in war is one of the most basic human contradictions – that amid the degeneracy, we can be our most noble, like Becket's flowers growing on a dung heap. This quality I see as the natural product of the violence of our evolutionary struggle. It comes from a dark and forgotten land, long ago, and enabled our forebears to prevail over rivals and stronger species. It separates the very best soldiers from the brutal thuggery that characterises ill-trained militia and gangsters.

The difference lies in motivation – those who do it for the tribe, their comrades and the greater good of the nation are immune from moral responsibility. If they do it for themselves in any way, the 'strange good' does not apply, and there are very serious personal consequences.

Any slight deviation from the moral values that every good soldier understands instinctively runs the risk of these personal consequences. We understand this, and walk alone with only our consciences to protect us. There is a personal price to be paid by those who do too much and step over the line. Most soldiers have seen this line – even touched it, and seen others cross it. It's not fair but hardly surprising that even those who have never made the fatal crossing can end up paying a price. But war was never supposed to be fair, as every soldier knows.

This is the dark, personal psychology of combat – in which the joy and relief of returning home can be corrupted into the guilt of having survived; the satisfaction of having done one's duty turned over the years into nightmares of self-loathing and anger. But there are no absolute causes and effects, as perhaps my 'theology' of crossing the line suggests.

Soldiers in combat try to find reasons for the deaths of their friends – to deduce some kind of logic to explain the horror taking place around them. They will say "Sergeant Smith was really careful, but nobody told him that the previous unit had set a pattern by using that same route every day;" or "Pete didn't camouflage the observation post well enough that day…" There has to be a reason for what happens to each person, ideally with somebody who can be blamed.

But the reality is that, as the Americans say, "Shit happens," without reason, logic or divine intervention. You can be trained to do your duty well, which makes you safer and wins battles, but can't protect you as an individual. You can also be trained to cope with constant adversity, cruelly thwarted expectations, and to accept tragedy. But because we are all individuals, this training cannot not inure us to the effects on our mind, character and soul.

Hitherto, medical science has played a very limited role in this.

Apart from good military leadership, the work of chaplains is, in my opinion, the most beneficial to the psychological welfare of most troops – whether or not they have any religious beliefs. The most effective psychological counselling is done informally by leaders and by comrades, therapy which very unfortunately stops as soon as soldiers return home. Only the most seriously affected should end up seeing military psychiatrists. Equally unfortunately, this isn't what happens.

This has very greatly concerned me over the last twenty years. And so, in the culmination of a lot of hard work, I've founded and enabled an Oxford University medical research foundation 'Scars of War' to bring cutting-edge neuroscience to the post-combat problems of soldiers.

We use very new technology to uncover the effects of extreme, prolonged stress and undiagnosed physical trauma on the brain, the brain-body systems and the mind. This will not show us how our souls and personalities are affected by war, but will explain how body-brain systems are affected, and how these adverse effects may be mitigated by drugs and therapy.

This may in turn help our minds to come to terms with our experiences – which could in turn make it easier for God to heal our souls.

Since its initial publication in 1984, many people have written to tell me that reading *Falklands Commando* made them want to join the Armed Forces. I'm still asked to sign ancient first editions belonging to now-senior officers who've said the same thing.

But because *Falklands Commando* ended with our return home, plus a few reflections from the Army Staff College at Camberley where I finalised the editing, it creates the impression of everyone living happily ever after. Unfortunately, as I hadn't realised at the time, that is all too often not the case.

So although my account of the events of 1982 is accurate, honest and others tell me evocative, there is a further story to be told, which I hope to publish in due course. Mine is to varying degrees much the same as that of a significant percentage of members of the Falklands Task, and veterans of the Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan – not forgetting those sucked into the tragedy of Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Kosovo and other campaigns.

How many are affected by their military combat experiences is a moot point: the MoD says 2-4% of everybody who deploys, whereas other British and US research indicates 14% to 20% and more, depending on unit, combat intensity and other factors. These are very large numbers of people, who try to hide their symptoms and live

normally – as I did. Special Forces are particularly affected, as they do the most business.

These are very dangerous times. We need fighting soldiers to keep our world functioning. Modern weapons and munitions are very much more powerful than ever before; today's operations more complex, unpredictable and stressful, making the soldiers of today far more vulnerable to psychological problems than ever before.

They risk their lives for *us*. More needs to be done to help *them*.

*St Clements, Oxford*

*January 2014*

# Chapter 1. The Calm Before the Storm

On 2 April 1982 I went down to Cornwall for Easter leave – a few days early, on the excuse of reconnoitring parachute-dropping zones for an exercise to be held in the summer. I travelled from my base at the Royal Marines Poole in Dorset in a blue RAF Ford Escort driven by Flight Lieutenant Jeff Diggle – of the Special Forces Flight. We were both very keen get out of the office.

We spent the day tramping the wet tussocks and sand dunes around Perranporth, chatting about approach headings for aircraft and hazards for paratroopers. There were disused mineshafts for the unwary to drop into, and critical tides to be built into the plan.

The day was extraordinarily bright, washed clean as it always is in Cornwall when the rain stops. We could see the church at Cubert – far larger than Cubert itself, and across green–capped dunes, the wind-worn granite of Perran Cross and its companion mound and large white cross. This mysterious hillock protects the remains of the tiny sixth century church of Saint Piran, reburied to save it from the elements. The now empty shanties of the ghastly Perranporth caravan site littered the dunes, under which is said to lie the storm-ruined city of Langarrow, a Cornish 'Sodom' which perished to be overlaid by the oldest Christian church in the country, and then this caravan site.

A flat-topped hill, with the small cruciform of houses that form the hamlet of Rose, was a misty pastel green, blurred by the vivid blue of the sea, the white of the choppy clouds and merged into the soft green of the land. Seagulls wheeled and squawked, and the chunter of a tractor carried a long way in the constant buffet of the wind.

The temperature was brisk, but with a mellowing of the sort that is not strictly to do with a few extra degrees on the thermometer. The long, wet haul of winter was ending, the winter world taking a few deep breaths in preparation for spring, and then the hectic activity of the summer. Quietly waking, the harsh, natural beauty of the North Cornwall coast was softening, to show its underlying gentleness.

Jeff Diggle and I ate pasties washed down with tea in a large formica-clad seaside café in Perranporth, bored waitresses staring blankly through misted-up plate glass windows. We sat, intruders amid deserted tables, out of place in our camouflage smocks and high-calved parachute boots. Apart from us, the café was empty for the summer onslaught, all systems ready to go – the calm before the storm.

I owned a stone house on the main street of St Agnes, once the residence of the Mine Captain – a man of local importance. Being an army captain was considered acceptable to ownership of this very

solid building. My back garden was overlooked by the chimney of what had once been the beam engine house for one of the many mine shafts in the area.

Today, peace and tranquillity cloak St Agnes' old port of Trevaunance Cove, which was once busy with the noise and dust of an ore crushing and sifting factory. St Agnes village is at the top of the hill, well above what would have been a dirty, smoky industrial landscape. Its houses are small, with thick granite walls and slate roofs, their woodwork painted white or green, with front doors of brighter, even vivid, colours. Milder seaside weather and the more southerly latitude enable the incongruity of occasional palm trees. A Cornish winter is grey and dull, with only the slate roofs shiny with water. But in clear sunshine the transformation is dramatic: glorious sunshine, washing lines billowing with bed sheets.

After two months of arctic mountain training in the cold, monochrome of Norway, my two-week's leave would be bright and varied. Repairs were required to the old house, boozing with the Perranporth 'Brewers' rugby club on Saturday night, risking all in the surf, and running every day along the cliffs, alone with gulls and the ocean.

I spent my first evening amongst friends at the St Agnes Hotel, a few yards down the main street from my house. The front bar was dark and cosy, walls covered with model ships, photos of life-boat crews both old and new; and of the port in its heyday, with sailing ships being loaded with ore down chutes from horse drawn carts. I made arrangements to meet there the next evening.

However at six o'clock the next morning, Maurice the local policeman knocked on my door. I was to report back to Royal Marines Poole at once, no reason given. He waited with his panda car then drove me to Truro station for the next train up-country.

I was returning to Royal Marines Poole, a modern military camp at the edge of Poole harbour, next door to the Rockley Sands holiday camp. The full name of my military unit was '148 Commando Forward Observation Battery Royal Artillery', based at Poole almost since the camp was created, in the grounds of a shooting lodge owned by Lord Wimborne.

Our unit cipher was the red-on-blue Combined Operations flash with interlinked Thompson sub-machine gun, and eagle upon an anchor, signifying the combination of expertise involved, first worn by the Second World War commandos. Back then, the Royal Navy provided coxswains for the assault boats, and the Army the soldiers to form the raiding parties that caused mayhem along the coast of occupied France.

148 Battery still recruits from both the Army and the Royal Navy. It is the only surviving commando unit that combines the expertise of the two services, as in those early days.

Joining 148 Battery entails an arduous selection process: a preparatory 'beat up' and then the Commando Course at the Commando Training Centre at Lympstone. As you travel on the train from Exeter to Plymouth, as I was that morning, you can see it on the far side of the River Exe estuary. Its modern buildings and grass banks belie the nature of its purpose, although you may see small figures with weapons and webbing equipment being made to run in the mud at low tide, or going endlessly around the assault course.

Commando training involves a lot of very cold, muddy water, climbing ropes, crawling through tunnels and marching for miles, soaking wet while carrying heavy kit. All the tests are preceded by long, gruelling exercises on Dartmoor, with inevitable bad weather; and candidates are messed around to such an extent that it no longer affects them. It's very unpleasant but excellent preparation for war.

Those who succeed go on to Aldershot and the Depot of the Parachute Regiment for the notorious 'P' Company (Parachute Selection Company). This is a very severe physical test lasting for four weeks, involving carrying heavy weights on long runs and marches, with assault courses, log races and field exercises designed to test aggression, determination, fitness and sense of humour. P Company does not place the same emphasis on gruelling tactical training, but nevertheless many successful commandos find it overly extreme and ruthless. The parachute course itself, run in a gentlemanly fashion by the RAF, is sedate and relaxing by contrast with what has gone on before. The embryo 'Nigsfo' (as the Naval Gunfire Support Forward Observer is abbreviated) then starts his six-month communications, tactics and observation training. Not everyone who gets this far succeeds. Considerable mental aptitude is needed to pass.

The primary purpose of the Commando Forward Observation Unit is to control the fire of the guns of the Royal Navy from on land, and the unit is equipped and trained to be put ashore in every way imaginable so as to be able to do this job. In 1982, the unit was divided into a number of forward observation teams (FO teams), each of five men – the usual special forces patrol of four (so that if one is wounded, two carry him while the fourth scouts ahead), plus an additional member to liaise aboard the gunship or with a formation headquarters ashore, if required.

A Royal Artillery captain leads each FO team. He has a bombardier (the artillery equivalent of a corporal) as his assistant. The team may split to carry our more than one operation, so the bombardier will take charge of one of the two teams created. The

other three men are a LRO (leading radio operator) or RO1 (radio operator class one) from the Royal Navy, a lance bombardier and a gunner.

Each team member is able to control the fire from a naval gunship and ordinary field artillery. The officer and bombardier are also trained to call in strike aircraft to bomb targets. The teams are normally well forward in battle, often behind enemy lines, getting ashore by boat, parachute or helicopter days before the main force. Thus they are part of the Special Forces network of eyes and ears that send information back to UK and the ships at sea.

Royal Marines Poole is very well equipped for the specialised training that is necessary to prepare for this demanding role. The dock area, known as the 'Hard', is the home of Landing Craft Company Royal Marines, who are experts in larger-scale assault craft work. The Special Boat Squadron, as they were known in 1982, also has their home in Poole, and 148 Battery has very close links with them, for the specific purpose of working together in war. This close relationship turned up trumps in the Falklands. At this time it was my responsibility to organise the teams allocated to working with the SBS and to lead one of those teams, FO1 (which is short for Forward Observation Team Number One).

Once you've managed to complete all the courses and get into 148 Battery, you still have to be accepted as a reliable member of the team, which can take some time. The combination of hardness, fitness, technical expertise and intelligence produces an out-of-the-ordinary sort of soldier who prefers to do things his own way.

Personal relationships within the FO teams are very close. They remain together for long periods and travel the world as a tightly-knit little unit. The officer is known as 'the boss' and the soldiers are referred to by their nicknames, in a relaxed, informal style that can be relied upon to irritate senior officers from outside the unit. On the rare occasion when the teams are in barracks, everyone makes great efforts to behave with due military deference. But when away, the teams will go out on the town together and become gratifyingly unmilitary. There is more contact with the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force than the Army, which creates a 'cosmopolitan' attitude that does not always gain approval in the Army proper. As a consequence, unit members specialise in being as low-profile as possible, both on and off duty.

Naval gunfire support (NGS for short) fired from guns on ships, delivering a much heavier shell than the 105mm Light Gun with which the gunners in the Falklands were equipped – and was generally more accurate than artillery. The older ships such as HMS *Antrim* and HMS *Plymouth* fired a 55lb high explosive shell 18,000

yards at a rate of more than one every two seconds using twin barrels on a single turret. (A field artillery gun fires a 35lb shell at up to four or five per minute, depending on the fitness and skill of the crew.) This fire is very accurate and puts down about a ton of high explosive every minute. Some of these older ships have twin turrets, which doubles their firepower.

The next generation of ships (Type 21's and Type 42's) have digital computers and fully automatic loading systems and are even more accurate, with each single barrel firing a 46lb shell 24,000 yards at the rate of 24 shells every minute. The response time is very fast (the time from when the ship receives the coordinates of the target over the radio from us, to when the round lands); and with the one gun, two targets can be engaged at the same time with one of them being illuminated by star-shell (which is loaded automatically and fired to burst above the target). Targets can be stored in the computer to be fired upon immediately.

The accuracy of a rapid-firing single naval gun does not spread the shells around as with the widely-spaced guns of an artillery battery. Area targets like infantry defensive positions are therefore best attacked using field artillery. But for damaging and even destroying buildings and bridges, or wrecking well-prepared trench positions, especially with overhead cover and fortifications that would have withstood a field-artillery bombardment, a naval gun is much better.

NGS has various peculiarities that make it seem a bit of a black art to those familiar only with artillery. The shells sometimes don't seem to do what they should, and there are seemingly inexplicable delays. All these things are in the nature of a system that's operating from a ship at sea; and it's only with experience and training that this very powerful weapon system can be made to unleash its full potential – which is the job of 148 Commando Forward Observation Battery.

As was usual for us, for January, February and most of March, 148 Battery had been in Norway with 3 Commando Brigade, doing mountain warfare training. This had finished with a week of parachuting, using special techniques involving sledges, onto frozen fjords, remote wooded hillsides and into the sea; and finally a large NATO exercise into which most of the unit parachuted in 5-man groups at night. This three-month period of ice and snow was an annual commitment, and many of the battery spent every winter there. One NCO had a total of sixteen Norway winters under his belt.

I'd been in the hospital for two weeks in January 1982 with back problems, and had gone out to Norway late to join the unit for the last

part of the deployment – parachuting and the final exercise. I was not allowed to jump because of the back problems that had put me in hospital, so I'd been handling the administration – which was not really my style at all.

In April, thanks to our stint in Norway, we were already acclimatised and prepared for war in the cold. The Falkland Islands (if that was where we were to be sent) would be very wet – as opposed to the usually below-zero dry cold of Norway. This would make things more difficult. But thanks to our traditional training areas in the UK, we seemed to specialise in going to Dartmoor, Okehampton and Cape Wrath, all selected for rain, wind and cold. We'd already been through the Falklands-type misery many times before, and knew exactly how to cope.

Experiencing bad conditions in training forces you to get your operating procedures absolutely right, because otherwise you spend more time surviving than doing the job. Training in atrocious weather means you are less likely to be found lacking on the day, when conditions may actually be easier. Our training was definitely realistic. The maxim 'Train hard, fight easy' is very true.

The Inter-City 125 sliced smoothly through the beautiful Cornish countryside, across the Tamar with a glimpse of gleaming, grey warships at anchor off Plymouth, then into the lush green of Devon. We emerged out beside a red sandstone cliff path, to pass by Dawlish golf course with the ocean immediately to our right-hand side. I wondered whether this recall was something to do with the Argentine scrap-metal men reported to be on South Georgia.

The day after returning from Norway, I'd concocted a spoof message about 'Operation Penguin', which set our battery second-in-command Captain Kevin Arnold telephoning the usual people we contact when sudden moves are afoot. Kevin was easily fooled because in our line of business you tend to look on world affairs with half a mind to participation. A panic move to Antarctica having just returned from Norway and the Arctic was not so surprising. But April Fool's Day had passed so now the joke had backfired on me. A god with such a sense of humour would be hard to handle.

So, I reasoned on the train, it was probably the Falklands.

Back at the playing fields and grey, modern buildings of RM Poole, the camp was in turmoil. The Argentinians seemed poised to invade the Falklands, and so Landing Craft Company, the Special Boat Squadron and the Battery were getting ready to go.

The Falkland Island Garrison force, a company of Royal Marines known as Naval Party 8901, were in the middle of the process of

swapping over. The majority of the new detachment had left RM Poole a week earlier. The last few troops to go were still here, after completing their six months' training and preparation. We'd come to know them well, so if the Falklands were to be invaded, we'd all have a personal involvement in this crisis.

There was a lot of Falklands experience at Poole. Several ex-NP8901 worked there. They now came forward with maps, photos and even cine film taken during their tours of duty there. Watching television news in the anteroom of the officers' mess, while drinking tea and munching toast, we watched as the story unfolded – with disbelief like every other viewer, but with a little more bated breath, and a lot more personal interest.

When the first TV pictures of the invasion were broadcast, the ex-NP8901 hands were able to point out exactly what we were seeing in valuable detail. We also saw shots of our friends spread-eagled on roads, being searched at gunpoint by Argentine Special Force soldiers.

NP8901 was a token force, not seriously intended to fight, although they did until the Governor ordered surrender when overwhelming odds made further resistance and loss of life pointless. We were very relieved when later we learned they'd all returned safely to the UK. Characteristically, they then lobbied furiously to be re-armed and sent south again – which is what happened.

The next few days were chaotic, telephoning round Britain for equipment that we had either not been permitted to have, or that we were due to have in some unspecified future. The floodgates were open and there were no problems. Storemen, dug out of their beds at 4 a.m., were not only polite and extremely helpful, but asked if there was anything else that we might need. They even arranged transportation! Captain Bob Harmes, our admin officer, lied furiously for days on end, getting us equipment of which we had previously only dreamed.

We watched the news with astonishment, as armoured cars drove through Port Stanley and the story of the brave fight by NP8901 unfolded. It was chilling to see weaponry that might end up shooting at us, and the soldiers that were to become our 'enemy'.

By contrast to the confusion elsewhere, it was a simple matter to get 148 Battery ready to go. The Duty NCO had phoned everybody up and we all came in, from wherever we had managed to get. Captain Willie McCracken and his team were deep in the New Zealand bush on an exercise, so took a few days longer. Our personal equipment, massive bergen rucksacks and webbing belt-fighting order were lined in our parachute training hangar according to which team we were in.

But once we were ready to deploy, the confusion started, with an endless stream of contradictory instructions and questions. What

vehicles should we take – if any? Did we need to take skis, the over-snow BVs (bandwagons) and full arctic equipment, and would we need the boats? The only way to mitigate this confusion was to take everything – as we did.

The Battery never had a send-off as such. We simply rushed away to join various ships and aircraft, usually with very little warning. I do remember however a gathering at which we were told (by an unpopular and I thought miscast major) that we were off for at least three months, which would be spent getting bored at sea. He urged us not to get the idea into our heads that we were going to fire bullets at Argentinians. His final encouraging and prophetic remark was that if we fired any 4.5-inch naval shells into Port Stanley he would "eat his boots".

I was due to be the first off the mark with my second-in-command Nick Allin and an *ad hoc* team. My usual FO1 team had been together for some time, but this strong and experienced group was split up in what I thought a misplaced attempt to spread expertise throughout the battery. Nick Allin and I were cross about this; in particular we lost our 'sailor' Stan Hardy, who was also a medic, at just the time we were most likely to need one. I'd sent Stan to get hands-on experience in the casualty department at Poole General Hospital, and he'd also handled gunshot wounds and other injuries and illnesses during a stint with me running jungle warfare training in Belize, Central America.

However, Bombardier Nick Allin remained my second-in-command. We'd been working together a lot over the last five years, and knew each other very well. In fact, his marriage was the first social event I'd attended in the battery when I first joined, and we'd spent plenty of time with each other, on exercises and socially. Nick is a cheerful and quite noisy bloke with a very sharp sense of humour that gets people working and keeps them amused. He comes from Okehampton and as a result gets quite a lot of stick about his 'janner' accent and the shortcomings of being a country boy. He replies to such sallies very sharply and with the appropriate references to the origins, parental, geographical or otherwise, of the critic. Nick was also a Royal Navy lightweight boxing champion.

My new sailor was RO1 Steve Hoyland, a very bright, cheerful Northerner from Middlesborough ('Burra' as he used to call it) who had the alarming habit of removing his front teeth and grinning through the gap. He'd been a radio operator on several big RN ships before coming to us, recently completing all the courses, with FO1 being his first operational team. When we were particularly cold, wet and miserable, Steve delighted in wishing himself back on board these ships. He'd paint pictures of the dogwatch lounging about in the warmth, making cups of coffee then sauntering off to their nice warm

'pits' (bunks).

Gunner 'Des' Nixon was a Yorkshireman, older than the average gunner, having left the Army and then come back in. He was a very experienced soldier who'd been a paratrooper in 7th Regiment Royal Horse Artillery, part of the Parachute Brigade. Des had been a gun 'Number One', in charge of a gun and its detachment. He'd left the Army, but after several adventures and time spent working on building sites, had decided to come back in. To do so he'd to relinquish his former rank of sergeant and start again as a Gunner.[1] He was a sharp as nails and absolutely uncrackable, with a direct but often very gentle concern for others and sense of humour. His shortness and fair hair made him seem a suitable victim to anyone looking for trouble, but when pressed the Nixon reaction was swift and absolute. The rest of the team referred to him as the 'Old Man', or 'Des the Shovel', after an unfortunate evening in Norway when a group of much larger Royal Marines made the mistake of pushing him around. More often than not the 'Old Man' showed them the way home.

The fifth member of FO1 was also the youngest, Gunner Tim Bedford. Like Steve and Des, he'd just completed the technical course at the end of the 148 Battery selection. He'd also come to 148 Battery from Basic Training, having been in the Forces for less than two years. Tim was inclined to be the quietest of the five of us, tall, gangly, straight-backed and serious-looking. Initially he, more than the other two, was worried about his lack of expertise. As time went on his self-confidence increased and he was more forthcoming.

Faced with putting a new team together at such a time, the overall lack of expertise was rather a worry for us all – but it did actually turn out to be a good thing. We used the weeks we were to spend on board ship going through everything we knew, talking about it and practising. There were also stacks of chat, wit and repartee, which in my view is the best sign of all. They were great fun to be with.

The chaotic week of preparation was tiring. We worked away on the phones in the battery offices, were summoned for briefings at strange times and went into Poole for final boozy dinners and hilarity in wine bars. We were summoned from our beds in the early hours of the morning to check equipment that had just arrived, so that when I finally received the word to pack our gear onto a four-ton truck and prepare to go, it was a relief.

More military confusion ensued. Initially we were told to drive 543 miles north to Arbroath, near Dundee in Scotland, to join 45 Commando. Then 45 Commando were told their ship had to sail to Marchwood near Southampton in Hampshire to load up some

vehicles, so we decided to wait. Finally 45 Commando were told to load everything into trucks, drive the 543 miles south to Marchwood to be reunited with their own vehicles which had already sailed, then load into another Royal Fleet Auxiliary ship (RFA) at the military port. Waiting saved us a 510-mile drive (it being 33 miles from Poole to Southampton…)

So on the morning of 4 April, with a four-ton truck full of kit, and ourselves in a Land Rover, we drove those 33 miles, to Marchwood Military Port, to load into the Royal Fleet Auxiliary *Sir Percivale*. We had five full sets of arctic gear, for South Georgia and in case the Falklands operation lasted into the winter. We had two inflatable rubber boats (Geminis) and four outboard motors with spares to match. In large, wicker-work hampers, carefully padded, were our radio sets, one for each of us and several spares, with two hand 'wankers' (heavy hand generators to charge up the batteries) and spare batteries. Bayonets had been issued, more as a declaration of intent as they fitted only one of the two sorts of rifles that we used. We took the 7.62-mm Self Loading Rifle (the SLR) and 9-mm Browning automatic pistols. However we found the lighter 5.56mm Armalite a better weapon for our purposes and so swapped, with the Brownings as concealed weapons 'of last resort'.

We were ready to parachute if required, with 'chutes, the special fuel bags needed when parachuting with a Gemini boat and outboard motors, para helmets, CSPEP's (carrying straps personal equipment parachutist), heavy duty zip-up waterproof bags, and so on. There was talk of us being parachuted on to gunships that had already sailed, in order to save time and get us there quickly.

I collected a pile of stationery from our Chief Clerk: notebooks, plastic film to waterproof the maps, sellotape, pens, pencils, A4 lined paper, exercise books, rulers, scissors and anything else I could purloin from his store.

Later, after a few days boredom at sea, I was stricken with regret at not bringing my guitar from Cornwall. It hadn't somehow seemed 'proper' to take it to war, plus it risked being lost in the chaos once we went into action. I'd left it there as a sort of talisman to ensure my return. But I should have brought it along. You need all the frivolity you can conjure up when life gets too serious.

We took the wrong exit off a roundabout, and as we made an ambitious U-turn across a traffic island, civilian drivers pulled over out of our way, giving us the thumbs up and waving through their wind screens. We stopped off *en route* at Des Nixon's house, in a compound of Army houses – he enacting the same scene of goodbyes that occurred every time a team went away. On this occasion we had no idea how long we might be gone or what we might have to do. We

hoped the diplomats would sort it out next week. The worried wives were cheerful, with puzzled children who'd seen Dad going off like this many times before, but realising this time was different.

*Sir Percivale* was moored at Marchwood Military Port with her stern ramp lowered. A progression of forklift trucks shifted pallets from the quayside, down an incline onto a floating pontoon and across the lowered ramp into the ship's hold. The bow also had a ramp so that vehicles could run right through the ship and into a succession of further ships linked together like a chain of very large caves. Three gangplanks were in use, and two cranes were using large nets to lift in stores, plus using special chain harnesses to load Land Rovers, trailers and 105-mm Light Guns. The other side of the narrow jetty was similarly occupied with the loading of sister ship RFA *Sir Lancelot.*

The dock was lined with waiting Land Rovers, their trailers bulging with camouflage nets and wooden poles, up-ended Bergen rucksacks, wickerwork radio hampers, black plastic jerrycans and petrol cans, all emptied and vented according to regulations ready for the voyage. Much of this equipment had come straight from Norway without having been unpacked. Troops, in camouflage windproof smocks, dark green 'OG' trousers (Olive Green) and boots, wearing their webbing equipment and carrying rifles or submachine guns, lounged against the vehicles and chatted. Some were sitting in cabs, others rooted about in the backs of trailers checking that nothing had been forgotten, and as soldiers always do, rearranging their kit.

The RCT dockers (Royal Corps of Transport) wearing white construction helmets, loaded the ships, as we waited until their loading schedule worked its way down to reach us. There was no rush or impatience. We'd been told we'd be on board for three months at least. Waiting was to be the name of the game.

In due course, when our time came, we went quietly up the gang plank. I noticed a name on a cabin door that I recognised, so I plonked my stuff on one of the spare bunks in that cabin, staking my claim with a pile of kit.

We whiled away the afternoon with a chaotic lunch in the main cookhouse ashore where cooks, overwhelmed with the extra numbers, had their larder stripped bare as if by locusts. Knowing we faced hours of waiting, I wandered away from the dock, up through the camp which I knew well from doing diving courses here, to its picturesque officer's mess to read the newspapers.

Loading continued until 4:30 pm. Tea and 'stickies' (buns) were served on board *Sir Percivale*, but after ransacking the RCT cookhouse, no one was hungry. I made the last few phone calls from the call box on the quay, the gangplanks were drawn up and the deck parties coiled ropes and prepared to sail. The loyal (and shapely) wife of one

of 45 Commando's helicopter pilots had driven all the way down from Scotland (he having flown in his Gazelle) to see him off, waving from the quay in bright red jeans.

There'd also been farewells on board *Sir Percival*, as the wives of RFA officers took their leave. Some had been living on board in their husband's palatial double cabins, cruising with the ship as a 'perk'. Operation Corporate entailed a rude curtailment of this nautical idyll, their sudden eviction on the eve of the ship's previously scheduled sailing for the delights of Rotterdam, adding to the general confusion.

We put to sea two days before the rest of the Task Force, pulled from the jetty by dirty, bustling tugs into the centre of the Solent just opposite the *QE2*'s berth, which was empty. We got under way slowly in the gathering dusk. The streetlights flicked on, white and orange dots of light across a blue-green, misty, spring evening. We nosed carefully down the channel past the river opening at Beaulieu, then the old Army mental hospital at Netley. With our sister *Sir Lancelot* ship astern, hooters sounding, echoing around the deserted shipyards and jetties, we were as fine a convoy as you could wish. A Ford Transit van and small saloon car hooted and flashed headlights. We waved back as the twilight deepened.

When the darkness made it impossible to see anything but the lights of the other ships and the lines of the quaysides, we melted away from the upper decks and went below to think about the open-ended 'sentence' of waiting that we were now starting. But, for some of those on that deck watching England slip away into the night, it had been their last glimpse of home.

# Chapter 2. At Sea

For our first two days at sea TV reception was very good, which was not surprising as *Sir Percivale* sailed from Marchwood to just south of Isle of Wight, where we waited for everybody else.

Television news showed us the animated preparations in Portsmouth and Plymouth, the loading of the LPD HMS *Fearless* (standing for Landing Platform Dock, describing the large flight-deck on the stern and the rear-entry internal dock, which takes four large landing craft). *Fearless* was to be the amphibious operations centre from which all the war planning would emanate. The two aircraft carriers, HMS *Hermes* and the new HMS *Invincible*, were crawling with ant-like chains of matelots passing stores hand-to-hand up the gang-planks, everything from boxes of baked beans and barrels of beer to Sea Dart missiles.

As *Sir Percivale* jerked and rolled in the swell, we watched the City of Plymouth's emotional farewell to HMS *Fearless* – ship's company and embarked Commandos lining the rails, helicopters on deck. *Fearless*' landing-craft followed in her wake like ducklings chasing after their mother. Wives gathered at the best vantage points for last glimpses, holding up small children for farewell waves.

Only a few weeks earlier I'd been in *Fearless*, sailing back from Norway. There had been the same purple-blue hills, slate-grey houses, but only a drowsy bustle in Plymouth Sound, and the sullen faces of HM Customs officials on a go-slow. But now, the colour and almost desperate carnival atmosphere reminded me more of leaving Grand Harbour Valetta in Malta, than departing Plymouth in the spring.

The farewells to 3 Commando Brigade we were watching on the wardroom telly differed from those we were to see three weeks later, via video cassettes dropped by parachute, of the departure of 5 Brigade in the *QE2*. By then, it seemed certain we were going to have to fight.

But when *Sir Percivale* sailed, the Task Force represented merely a floating threat, the back-up for political negotiations, a diplomatic lever lending weight to the measured formulae of negotiation. Our departure also seemed to brighten the clouds of the economic recession. Later, once the sombre implications of the operation had become more apparent, the mood was different.

HMS *Fearless*, from her homeport of Plymouth, and HMS *Hermes,* HMS *Invincible,* and SS *Canberra* from Portsmouth-Southampton, all sailed to a blaze of media glory, stage-managed as the UK's reaction to the Argentine invasion. Soldiers and sailors lined the decks, shoulder to shoulder; waving and cheering with various Royal Marine Bands

playing jaunty regimental marches, pop tunes and the strangely haunting Rod Stewart song 'I Am Sailing'. Fire tugs sent sprays of water high into the air and bunting fluttered.

But for us already at sea, the weather was taking a turn for the worse, and the sea mist obscured even the south coast of the Isle of Wight.

Most of us were well used to life on board ship, slipping into our own idiosyncratic routines, aimed at maintaining at least some privacy under crowded conditions, and to avoid the frustration that can turn into friction. For the officers, the ship's focal point was the wardroom. Along with the ship's officers, we ate in a small dining room and drank at the bar. They however, with their huge double-cabins and adjoining private bathrooms and loos, left the sitting-room part of the wardroom with its bench seats and tables to the 'military officers'. We played board games: Scrabble and Diplomacy (the latter very topical) and read books from a small library shared with the rest of the ship.

We slept in small, four-bunk 'Embarked Force Officers' cabins, at the stern behind the wardroom proper with one 2-berth cabin for the Officer Commanding Troops, Major Gerry Akhurst. All were full, and our huge amount of kit blocked the passages – which was dangerous. So by mutual agreement, the one officers' bathroom (for those who cannot bear the thought of taking showers) became a stowage space filled to the ceiling with sea bags, bergens, webbing and battered suitcases.

The ship was officered by Royal Fleet Auxiliary merchant seamen, bound by an extra clause in their contract enforcing participation in exploits like this. We saw very little of them, which wasn't surprising as they worked the same watches all the time. Some were nocturnal, while others understandably preferred their large cabin sitting-rooms to the crowded wardroom.

The crew of *Sir Percivale* were Hong Kong Chinese. They lived in the same sort of accommodation as us, two decks below. Every morning a steward would come in with cups of revoltingly strong tea with added sugar and biscuits, performing an impressive balancing act over our bergens, sea kit bags, flying helmets, nav bags and suitcases. Although not actually drinkable, the tea's arrival meant breakfast would be served in half an hour. We got up in relays to shave in our cabins' single washbasin, before putting on lightweight camouflage trousers, shirt and desert boots. Desert boots are the polite thing to wear on ships – rubber-soled combat boots leave black streaks on decks that sailors have spent hours polishing.

*Sir Percivale* carried a variety of different military units: guns and gunners from two commando batteries, 7 (Sphinx) and my former gun

battery 8 (Alma) – known as 'Black Eight', people from 45 Commando and its helicopter flight plus their three Gazelles, pilots, ground crew, fitters, marshallers, and spare parts. The flight commander was my cabin-mate Lieutenant Nick Pounds.

A Mexe Float Troop were permanently based on the ship – members of the Royal Corps of Transport (RCT) from Marchwood, who enjoyed the best cabins. I didn't know where the word 'Mexe' comes from,[2] (pronounced like Mexican but without the 'can'), whereas the mexe floats themselves were huge metal pontoons that could be clipped together to form rafts along which lorries could drive. They had huge outboard tractor-type diesel motors to enable them to shuttle vehicles ashore, or so they could manoeuvre together to form a continuous ramp from the supply ships onto hard standing ashore. They're essential for places with shelving beaches and no jetties.

The Mexe Float Troop, being self-consciously the old hands on board, enjoyed privileges, and acted studiously casual about the whole thing. There was also a defensive aspect to this, as they were not commando-trained. So although it was 'their' ship, we were unknown and probably rather challenging. Later on, the metal 'Mexe' Pontoons, which were carried strapped to the sides of the ship, became loose in a storm and on several occasions were very nearly ditched. When we arrived at Ascension, they worked very hard shifting cargoes around the fleet.

The ship was at its maximum capacity. Its intended war role was to move soldiers across the Channel to reinforce British units in Germany, and in peacetime to move supplies across the Channel, and soldiers to Northern Ireland. It was therefore only designed to operate at maximum capacity for a few days, but no more. However we were to be on board for an unknown number of weeks, rather than just those few days.

In the ocean swell, stumpy old *Sir Percival* rolled badly. At night, in order to be able to sleep at all, I put my bulky orange ships life jacket under one side of my mattress, away from the wall, so as to wedge myself inside the V between bunk and bulkhead. The lifejacket ploy saved me from the deadly sideways roll – leaving just the rocking-horse movement of the bow-to-stern axis. There wasn't much to be done about the up-surges, which woke you in an instant of panicky weightless and then, in the nausea-creating opposite reaction, pressing you firmly down into the mattress. But this wasn't too difficult to get used to, and sleep came reasonably easily, except for one week when we had continuous bad weather, providing seven days of grim insomnia for most of us.

During the bad weather people stayed horizontal as much as

possible, keeping the headachy nausea at bay. Meals were taken by all but the most chronically affected, and eventually most found their sea legs. Some professional sailors never adapt and continue to suffer seasickness. One wonders why on earth they persist with their career. Later, down in the Falklands, on the bridge of HMS *Fearless* during howling storms, I was to watch with admiration, as an ashen-faced naval officer-of-the-watch crouched over the chart table to check their position, scanned the heaving horizon with binoculars, turning to peer into radar screens, periodically ducking aside to be violently sick into conveniently placed buckets – hell realised on earth I should think.

With the variety of units on board, *Sir Percivale* became a tribal community. The military 'families' stayed together: 7 (Sphinx) Commando Battery were the most complete unit on board, with all their guns, vehicles, ammunition and men. Gun batteries work, fight and play together, presenting a united front to the rest of the world. Their BC (Battery Commander) and our OC Troops, Major Gerry Akhurst, was capable, and easygoing, with a friendly magnanimity that eased us through much potential friction and strife.

'Black Eight' – my former gun battery, had 2/3rds of its number on board. Its nickname came from the Crimean War's Battle of Alma during which the guns had gone ahead of the infantry to storm the heights. They'd fired so much ammunition that the faces of the gunners and the skins of their initially white horses were burned black by gunpowder.

The units formed groups for training: PT in the mornings, gunnery, weapon drills, lectures and kit preparation. This was centrally co-ordinated by Gerry Akhurst, so the ship's very limited free spaces could be utilised fairly without hindering its smooth running.

*Sir Percival*'s Captain Pitt was tremendously helpful and became a great favourite. He ended the stand-off between us swarming military officers and his reticent ship's officers, whose routines were seriously inconvenienced by our presence. The Chinese head steward attempted to have us eat at different times, which Captain Pitt vetoed. This would have given the wily steward the opportunity to provide different menus to lessen his workload, and who knows what else besides. So we all sat down to eat together, and the ice was broken.

The sergeants had their own mess. From time to time invitations were issued – better described as Summons – for the officers to visit. One night there was the horse-racing – a traditional ship-board game where you 'buy' a cardboard horse in an auction using real money, which races for its owners who get the total proceeds of the auction if the horse wins. The race is run on large squares and the moves are determined by throwing the dice. There are side bets too, and normally the officers are comprehensively laundered, especially as the

sergeants very 'kindly' agree to allow their officers to sign bar-chits to place their bets rather than using cash. We stumbled out afterwards very late, and weren't terribly well the next day. It transpired however, that on this occasion we'd taken *them* to the cleaners by winning races with horses bought very cheaply, while dipping out of auctions where the bidding got out of hand.

The soldiers on board were of all shapes and sizes, from the bear-like Sergeant 'Taxi' Kaslyuski, who won the beard-growing competition in spite of getting fed up with its scratching and shaving it off half-way through, to the diminutive Bombardier Tulip (known as 'Petal') whose deadpan sense of humour usually caught me out. The guys were to a certain extent animated by events, but their excitement was tempered by having done all this before, in previous periods of international crisis.

The troop accommodation was nothing short of appalling and a nightmare for the officer responsible – Lt Bill McRae, the assistant Quartermaster of 45 Commando. A warship's mess decks are very cramped, but these were designed only for one, or at most two night's transit. The bunks were suspended in threes, above each other, in rows, nose to toe. There was no bedding and our sleeping bags were far too hot to use. So they were zipped up into a waterproof cover to become a cushion for the divan seat that was formed during the day by turning down the middle bunk and hooking up the top one. There was no stowage space for personal kit, and only minimal locker space.

In these desperately overcrowded conditions, hygiene was a major concern. Every night an officer accompanied by a senior non-commissioned officer (a sergeant or above) made a formal inspection known as 'Rounds', looking carefully at everything, especially each lavatory, sink, shower and drain. The senior hand on each mess deck was present and reported the defects in his section. This daily inventory allowed us to pressurise the already harassed ship's engineers. Delays in making repairs could lead to infections, food poisoning or outbreaks of disease – problems unfamiliar to us in the 20th century, but the major cause of deaths in previous military campaigns.

The air-conditioning had never been needed on the European runs so had fallen into disuse, and then when required did not work. Once we entered the tropics the fresh water was turned off, restricted to just 30 minutes per day because the ship's seawater converter couldn't cope. The normal naval rules for using a shower are to turn on and wet oneself, turn off and soap up, and then turn on briefly to rinse off. Even so we were running short by the time we reached Ascension. The only way to get a drink was to keep your water bottles and other containers filled whenever the water was on.

This seething mass of humanity was further subjugated 24/7 by 'pipes' from the ship's omnipresent tannoy system, operated from the guardroom. The duty NCO made the 'pipes', which were very loud, intrusive and often distorted – like most British Rail Guards. If his accent was particularly strong, or when he didn't understand the message, the noise was incomprehensible. This awful voice would cut into conversations, sleep and one's inner-most thoughts. Worse, they would cut-out the World Service news reports on whose every word we hung, with pointless announcements.

Piped announcements are an unfortunate part of life in warships (and astonishingly also RAF Officers Messes). Later in this crisis, once battle was joined and people working watches needed to sleep during the day, there was an end to this piping of trivia. Thirty years later, I still have a strong dislike of any loudspeaker system used in this lazy, thoughtless and intrusive way.

The long journey ahead, our poor living conditions and the boredom that would eventually strike everyone, led to the invention of a plethora of activities. Daily exercise started once the storms and seasickness abated. Weapon drills and map preparation, first aid, and lectures on all imaginable subjects were programmed, and serious training began.

The padre of 45 Commando, the Rev Wynne Jones, decided he would undertake the single-handed production of a ship's newspaper, taking the view that this was one of a padre's 'Duties in Action'. He called it the *Oily Rag*, a reference to the many similarities between *Sir Percivale* and tramp steamers, whose grimy engineers had coaxed them around the world. Our ship's engineer wasn't too pleased, but it seemed appropriate to us.

The padre's editorial style was refreshingly distinct. He published everything that people were kind enough to submit to him without any alteration or amendment, even retaining the spelling of the original to add to the flavour. His only changes were inadvertent typos or errors from deciphering poorly written manuscripts. He'd start with news from the daily teleprinted compilation and summaries of UK newspapers transmitted from London. The rest was an open forum for anything at all. I became a regular contributor with an anonymous column 'Don't Get Pissed Off… But' which took shipboard events and exaggerated them. My pen name 'Mack' was swiftly rumbled once the level of the humour had been assessed.

We were avid for news, and as not everyone was able to listen to the radio, the padre's bulletins were very useful. We were most concerned with the latest moves in Anglo-Argentinian diplomatic relations, and the Parliamentary debates about the crisis. We were participants, along with the two Super Powers, our EEC allies and the

whole complex South American imbroglio. Something had to be done, we were part of the manoeuvrings, and some of us might be about to die for it.

In the *Oily Rag* dated 10 April 1982, Wynne reported UK defence secretary Nott as saying that the Royal Navy would sink Argentine naval ships in the exclusion zone after a deadline this coming Monday. When told of this, President Galtieri threatened to respond with war. Nott had said, "Let them come out". Meanwhile, the US Secretary of State, Al Haig was in Buenos Aires, greeted by a mass rally in support of the *Malvinas* invasion. (On 12 April the *Rag* was to report Mr Haig as having shuttled to London.) There were reports of the Argentinians laying mines round the Falklands and installing sophisticated surveillance systems there; of the fifteen civil servants on the islands asking for the evacuation of the civilians before the Task Force arrived, which the deposed Governor countered by saying that 90% of the islanders would not leave.

But it looked as though there'd be no settlement – rather long delays, during which conditions at sea would sap our capacity to fight, the southern hemisphere winter would set in, and the Argentinians would have time to strengthen their defences.

Lesser items of news recorded the tribulations of people other than ourselves: 500 Mexicans in danger from a volcano, eight killed in a volcanic eruption in Indonesia, and three guerrillas to be executed in South Africa. On previous 10ths of April, there had been three naval victories: a French ship captured in 1795, the Second Destroyer Flotilla winning the first battle of Narvik in 1940 (Captain Warburton being awarded the VC), and a German U-Boat sunk in 1945.

The 'Useful Information of the Day' was the 'vital statistics' of HMS *Fearless:* laid down in 1962 (twenty years ago, which seemed a long time), the number of tons of water it displaced, and the numbers of landing craft, trucks and tanks it carried. There were also one or two notices which were not always what they seemed. The naïve volunteers of 10 April who reported to the 'Mombassa Rest and Recreation Centre' run by Staff Sergeant Smith ended up painting vehicle trailers.

The rest of the *Oily Rag* was given over to free-enterprise journalism, without censorship. To be a regular columnist in the *Rag*, it was important to write in the vernacular. As each issue was read, we developed an across-the-board pride that our ship had of certainty risen into the international class so far as coarse humour was concerned. As a solemn announcement in the *Rag* stated:

"The editors of Playboy and Knave wish to announce that next month's issue will consist of cartoons and photographs only. This is because the dirty bastards that write all the letters and articles are on

board this ship."

My 'Don't Get Pissed Off… But' column offered readers accounts of life on various other ships throughout the Fleet, detailing luxuries unknown on ours, or inventing peculiar naval customs and ceremonies that we simple soldiers ought to learn about. My alternative storyline was a comic-opera hierarchy of Argentine military characters, chronicling their imagined rise and fall as fearful news of the approaching Task Force reached them. What can you say about the enemy? It was psychologically better for us – and more civilised, not to portray them as odious. There was very little hatred in the Task Force.

In the 10 April issue, I described life on the *Canberra*, the luxury passenger liner bringing down a combination of Royal Marines, Army commandos, and Parachute Regiment. I wrote of 'Phyllis and Desmond' giving ballroom dancing lessons every morning, and growing rivalries among the embarked personnel because the female dance troupe 'Pans People' had been left on board by accident amid the confusion of their sailing, and how I'd offered to put them up on *Sir Percivale* to stop the ensuing quarrels.

In the next issue I was able to give more details: how there'd been a collapse of morale on the luxury liner because of too many compulsory cocktail parades, and how an escape committee was building a glider in the main ladies lavatory using seat planking from the lifeboats, with all members of 3 Para donating their left trouser legs for the fabric to cover the frame: "So far no-one suspects a thing, but with them pacing the upper decks using their remaining trouser leg to get rid of dirt from the tunnel, the Paras are being kept pretty busy." Meanwhile the Royal Yacht, as my confidential information continued, was being fitted out for the South Atlantic, as the troops to travel in her were trained at Windsor by the Brigade of Guards to cock the little finger when drinking tea and not to say 'shit' when things go wrong.

The 10 April issue of the *Oily Rag* also introduced the hero of my Buenos Aires saga, Speedy Gonzales, who while attempting a gunboat attack on the *Sir Percivale*, panicked when he saw Captain Nick Pound's bright red helicopter flotation bags, after they were inflated by accident when he was in full flight (a true incident). Gonzales was due for high promotion nonetheless, with correspondingly heavier responsibilities, heavier even than his medals, which occasionally overbalanced him.

God's representative on *Sir Percivale* Wynne Jones was a real gem. A slim, dark Welshman, 45 Commando's padre had endured the rigours of the commando course, which for most padres was a test of faith as well as a test of their character. The commando course is

designed to produce soldiers who carry on doing their job despite the worst physical conditions that can be arranged, regardless of how tired the instructors have managed to make them. Having a padre on the course is an added bonus for the instructors who devise 'special-to-arm' tests for him, such as stopping the rain on Dartmoor when on exercise or demonstrating his ability to walk on water. He is berated when he fails:

"Come on padre, you can't expect these soldiers to carry on with a padre who can't even walk across a pond. Even my small son could manage a quick stroll across there. Come on padre, have another go. We'll keep the first attempt a secret from the men. Come on, sir, you're not even trying. We can't allow you into the Commando Brigade after a performance like that. All the other padres who come on this course manage it. We'll just have to try every day until you get it right." And the whole course will have to do it too, as a punishment for letting their padre be so *Idle* and *Useless*.

Everyone is loaded with insults that become like background noise and a perverse form of entertainment. Black men are universally referred to as 'Chalky' and Irishmen run the whole gamut of 'paddyisms'. Officers receive special treatment, being 'requested' to do press-ups in muddy pools, throw themselves into rivers, and so on. The idea is that in spite of constant indignity, you remain the man in charge. The process develops a 'no-nonsense' sort of leader whose judgement is unaffected by bad conditions and stress. The soldiers become similarly undisturbed by their circumstances or by being buggered about, and everyone develops an incredibly strong team spirit. It also produces a very special sort of clergyman.

On Easter Sunday, Wynne gave a service on the forrad hold hatch cover, the guns lashed down beside us. There were a lot of people standing around enjoying the sunshine. One of the sergeants major bellowed across to them, "Come over here and get your fucking souls cleansed" which got us off to a good start.

Wynne, in his full cassock and surplice, stood out front. "Without further ado, gents, let's start off with a song. I've got a couple of good 'uns so let's give it rock-all".

We got stuck into 'There is a green hill far away' realising that, like us, Wynne knew the disrespectful rendition of 'For he's a jolly good fellow' that can follow. Thankfully this did not happen. He also gave us a little talk about what we were off to do, and Christianity being a man's religion. These few moments of singing and thought were a complete break from the military reality, worry and discomfort, which everyone enjoyed. We finished with the Naval Prayer:

O Eternal Lord God who alone spreads out the heavens and rulest the raging of the sea,

Who has compassed the waters with bounds until day and night come to an end.

Be pleased to receive unto thy almighty and most gracious protection the persons of us thy servants and the fleet in which we serve. Preserve us from the dangers of the sea and of the air and from the violence of the enemy that we may be a safeguard unto our most Sovereign Lady Queen Elizabeth and her Dominions, and a security for such as pass on the seas upon their lawful occasions.

That the inhabitants of our Island and Commonwealth may in peace and quietness serve thee our God,

And that we may return in safety to enjoy the blessings of the land with fruits of labours and with a thankful remembrance of thy mercies,

To praise and glorify thy Holy Name,

Through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.

This prayer seemed to sum it all up, and gave me a sense of the 'timelessness' of our venture. We were, as our predecessors for hundreds of years had done, ensuring the safety of those engaged in their 'lawful occasions'. The beauty of the language, with its succinct brevity and complete relevance, was reassurance and comfort.

I was later to hear of Wynne from several people throughout the Falklands campaign. He was constantly up with the soldiers doing his best to take minds off the harsh realities, trying to awaken more happy memories of home. Whatever he really thought, he always appeared cheerful, yet he could read moods and join them, talking about the military side then enquiring about your family to bring you out of yourself a bit. One story about Wynne came to me via some Marines in 40 Commando, who were the neighbouring unit to 45 Commando. They had seen a strange, muffled figure roaming around in the darkness calling out and waving. (It must have been like that ghastly film apparition in *The Signalman*.) The sentries, who had their weapons cocked and ready to shoot, waited as the strange figure drew closer.

"Zooloo, Zooloo, Zooloo" it cried.

They alerted the whole troop, which stood to in their trenches with their weapons, and the troop commander moved forward to investigate. As the figure drew closer, the words that the bitterly cold wind was whipping away became clearer:

"Zooloo, Zooloo Company. Where are you?"

So the sentry challenged the figure.

*"Halt*, who goes there?"

"Oh thank goodness I've found somebody. It's only the padre and I've forgotten the fucking password."

With a padre like that how could we not succeed?

Each morning after breakfast, we would perch on bar stools strategically under the ceilings' cool air ducts, and listen to the World Service of the BBC. It seemed as if the whole planet was degenerating into violence and tension – which was depressing. Any small development in Falklands negotiations was discussed with strong personal interest. The sooner the politicians and diplomats sorted it out, the sooner we would all be off *Sir Percivale* and back home.

On 11 April, the news for us at sea was not inspiring. Mr Nott, having decreed that a 'No-Go' area around the Falklands would be enforced in the next 24 hours, was receiving the US shuttle-diplomat Alexander Haig, who was said to have 'specific ideas for discussion'. All sides were girding up their loins. The Islanders transmitted an Easter greeting to the Task Force, addressed to Admiral Woodward and saying 'Onward Christian Soldiers'. In response, the Argentinean invaders confiscated their radio sets. General Galtieri told a rally in Buenos Aires that Argentina wanted peace but would fight if necessary, and the EEC announced a complete ban on Argentinean imports.

The only bit of good news for us at sea was that our friends from RM Poole, Lieutenant Keith Mills and his Royal Marine detachment (with thirteen civilians from South Georgia) were to be repatriated. A sniper in Jerusalem took pot-shots at pilgrims entering the Domed Mosque, injuring eight and killing two, and Israel was building up its forces on the Syrian border as tension in the Middle East mounted.

On *Sir Percivale* we were urged to cut down our consumption of water during even the daily half-hour period. Some dissidents were letting their showers continue to run whilst soaping themselves. The main galley was only just coping with the overload of hungry soldiers, and the food was less than wonderful. With the water off most of the time, it wasn't easy to get a drink, which in the tropical heat was leading to problems. Water bottles had to be kept filled. Tempers were not helped by one particularly officious Sergeant Major decreeing that the nightly beer issue, two cans per man, was to be made with the cans being opened as they were handed over to prevent anyone storing the cans for a few nights, and then getting drunk. This particular stupidity was rescinded pretty sharply.

By now we were 120 miles north of Tangiers. It was warm with no sign of land, fish or birds. The other ships in the Task Force could now be seen, sailing parallel to us but widely spaced. The Royal Navy warship escorts used their superior speed to sheepdog their way

around the flock, while we ploughed along as best we could. Some mornings we woke to find ourselves completely alone, the horizon empty, as if we had been left behind, which was a little alarming.

We knew absolutely nothing about what we might have to do. But we were not now sailing straight to the Falklands, but to Ascension Island. The speed of our loading in the UK had spread everything hopelessly across the fleet. No one knew what was on-board, what had been forgotten and where anything was. Our hold was piled high and would take days to rearrange. I was expecting several bits of kit to be delivered to us in the next wave of ships, but had no idea where I was to collect it, or when.

It took ten days to get to Ascension Island – longer than expected. We'd failed to appreciate the distances involved and had thought in terms of a week to Ascension, then another week to the Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ).

The importance of world news was totally eclipsed by personal news from home. We'd managed to get our mail away at Gibraltar by helicopter as we passed, but received none in return. We'd been told that mail for us was piling up at Ascension, and were desperate for it. As we drew closer, Bill McRae was overwhelmed by demands for stamps, so he issued two per head with the eminently sensible instruction that several letters be included in each envelope for reposting in the UK.

Everyone knows from the last war just how important mail is for morale. But you have to be in a situation like ours to really appreciate it. Letters from home become the only truly private thing you have, and the only proof of your existence as an individual outside the military machine. Soldiers who didn't receive any mail would often be given letters by their mates to read – usually with the 'sports page' omitted.

# Chapter 3. Planners and Hoaxers

Once the rough weather abated, seasickness eased and we began to feel better, the endless task of planning began. 3 Commando Brigade Staff on HMS *Fearless* churned out scenario after scenario, appreciations, plans, then counter-plans. A helicopter shuttle service round the fleet was started, one circuit in the morning and back again late afternoon. Known as the 'SDS run' (SeaKing Delivery Service), it was mostly done by Sea Kings from *Fearless*, which were too big to land on the other ships. So men, supplies and mail had to be winched up and down from the hover while the ships steamed onwards. This process was time (and fuel) consuming, and very tiring for the pilots.

As a passenger it meant at least one day wasted – waiting for an SDS to arrive, going with it round the fleet, finding out from the crewmen that they'd already been to your destination, landing somewhere else, having lunch and waiting until they came back on the afternoon run to deliver you to your destination or back to where you started. At this stage the crewman usually took pity on you and flew you direct.

The confusion increased as we steamed south. The ships painted out their recognition numbers and letters so that, even to the trained eye, ships of the same type could not be differentiated. People were regularly landed on the wrong ship, and got stuck there if the weather changed for the worse and the SDS could not fly.

I ventured into this chaos in order to go to the fount of all wisdom, HMS *Fearless*, to see for myself what was being planned. It was most unlike *Sir Percivale,* with her lack of water, washing and the beard-growing competition. Everyone was spruce, brisk and military, lifejackets and respirators ready for immediate use on their waist belts, and carrying briefcases. The wardroom was very much larger than our cosy room on *Sir Percivale*, but crowded with staff officers standing in groups, pointing at files and arguing. The corridors were lined with cartons of breakfast cereal and floored with boxes of tinned tomatoes and baked beans, so you had to crouch as you walked.

Lieutenant-Colonel Mike Holroyd Smith, tall, fair-haired, nicknamed 'Michael Caine' by the soldiers because of a resemblance, and by the officers simply as 'HS', commanded 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery. He was the brigadier's adviser on all aspects of fire support, from naval gunfire, artillery and fighter-ground attack (the Harriers), to the Rapier and Blowpipe air defence missiles, and also his deputy. HS had been the 'Black Eight' battery commander during my first posting as a second lieutenant in 1974 so we knew each other pretty well. He smoked a stubby pipe, and whenever he felt

his point was not being taken he would remove it from his mouth and poke the stem at whoever was being slow to follow his argument.

There was much peacetime sophistry concerning gunnery which had to be dispelled so realistic plans could be made. Colonel Mike would lecture groups of offending staff officers, jabbing the air with his pipe, turning to me with a glinty smile and saying, out of the corner of his mouth, "These bloody staff officers. They don't have the *first* idea about artillery."

He certainly knew what he was talking about and thankfully, by dint of his experience and strong personality, the Brigade Staff listened to him. He'd spent his early career in Oman fighting communist infiltrators from the Yemen and his views on artillery were simple, direct, uncompromising and, more importantly, had already been tested in action. He was good to work for because he let you get on with it, didn't mind mistakes (but woe betide if you made the same one twice) and made it quite clear what he required.

The resident Falklands expert was another friend from RM Poole, Major Ewen Southby-Tailyour. He'd commanded a previous Falklands Naval Party 8901 and, being a very keen yachtsman, had produced a book on inshore navigation around the islands, which he'd published to very little response. (Afterwards this book was to be re-printed and Ewen become Yachtsman of the Year.) He was very lively company but, as the expedition progressed, became increasingly worried. Ewen's judgement and information were increasingly to be relied on, for the critical decisions regarding where we were to land. He agonised over the accuracy and relevance of his information, as he knew the dreadful implications of landing in the wrong place for us all

Lieutenant-Colonel Mike Rose, the Commanding Officer of 22 SAS, beavered away in a green-painted Portacabin lashed down on the port Sea Cat deck, more usually used to instruct officer cadets in the mysteries of navigation. Tall, boyish and athletic-looking, with a very clear, direct gaze, he was a prime example of that most elite of breeds, the intelligent Guards officer. An historian from my Oxford college St Edmund Hall, Mike Rose was an advocate of the hard-hitting raid and reckoned the whole thing could be sorted out quickly with a few full-blooded efforts. As he'd commanded Operation Nimrod – the SAS' assault on the Iranian Embassy in London two years earlier, this was to be expected. Various ferocious plans were generated, for instance an 'Israeli-type' raid on Port Stanley airfield with Hercules troop-transporters disgorging a squadron of SAS to create mayhem.

Brigadier Julian Thompson presided over this ants nest of furious staff work with a calm but firm influence. He was universally known and liked, and knew most of the officers in 3 Commando Brigade by name. He was under great pressure – from above in London, sideways

from the Navy, plus he had to do his own job as well.

In the planning stages, everyone put forward their ideas, of which some would be examined in more detail. It was essential that everyone act true to their own role, for example that artillerymen stress the advantage and devastation of naval and field artillery and the SAS the psychological impact (on already tremulous conscript soldiers) of the morale-cracking violence of their methods. From all these ideas the brigadier could put together realistic plans to fit the political options – which at this early stage could mean virtually anything. Some hare-brained schemes resulted and so were eliminated as the staff worked towards a set of workable military options to match the ever-shifting political and diplomatic developments.

We continued to be depressed by the gloominess of world news, the routine of shipboard life and our military preparations. Every day that passed made the first-aid lectures, the weapon-training drills and talks about the geography, flora and fauna of the Falklands seem more relevant. Our future was very uncertain. Tomorrow there might be a political settlement, or we would continue sailing south toward possible destruction. It was important to stay positive, and divert everyone's mind from the grim options. My small contribution was to keep writing for the *Oily Rag*. Here's the report of my visit to HMS *Fearless* and the rumours we'd heard (and hoped were true) that they were suffering food shortages:

> "As promised, your faithful correspondent has braved the hungry waves and made the perilous journey by winch and Sea King to HMS *Fearless* in order to be able to report the true situation there.
>
> Firstly the rumours you have heard about food shortages are not true. Every fourth man is not having his left arm amputated above the elbow for the pot, but I do understand that the officers in the wardroom get swan sandwiches for tea only every *other* day. The passages are paved with 10-man compo boxes and tinned tomatoes and you feel like Alice in Wonderland having taken the pill (the one to make her grow taller, but not one that stops her having babies when the Mad Hatter's Tea Party turns out to be a gang-bang).
>
> There are an awful lot of people rushing round on *Fearless* looking 'Terribly Important' and 'Very Busy'. They all have briefcases and go to Conferences. I have, however, made a discovery, which may explain everything. At night *Fearless* is completely empty, like the Marie Celeste, not a soul on board.

You see what happens is that they all go home. It was partly because they discovered that there were no sheets on board, only nasty scratchy sleeping bags. But mostly because somebody discovered a hatchway that wasn't on the blueprints and didn't seem to go anywhere. I tried it and found myself getting 'filled-in' after the Man United game, so I came straight back. Anyway, at 6 p.m. they all get their little briefcases and when they think no one is looking they slink off home. I thought you'd all like to know."

My Buenos Aires comic opera character *Capitano* Speedy Gonzales had been promoted and interviewed by Señor Costa Mendez and Admiral Enrico Frigorifico with a view to taking a naval squadron to sea – an heroic role to which he was looking forward greatly, but then at the last minute could not perform due to some unspecified medical condition. I was running out of inspiration now, but luckily discovered that the Argentinians had bought the *Veinticinco de Mayo* – their aircraft carrier – from us, after the Second World War, when it had been called HMS Venerable, Hence, a new arrival in my 'Don't Get Pissed Off' column, a very ancient able seaman called Ramsbottom:

"Meanwhile back in Buenos Aires, Admiralissimo Enrico Frigorifico has scored a major psychological victory in his campaign to destroy the entire Royal Navy. He has captured a British Matelot! Last night the prisoner of war was paraded before the world's press and here is a transcript of the interview:

'Okay you know. We of the Argentine Navy – the most powerful deadly and magnificent navy in the whole of southeast South America have captured, after a fierce but glorious struggle, this bottom-wiper of a son of a jellyfish whose mother cannot even cook runner beans for tea on Sundays. He is so stupid, this stupid little person, he cannot speak any language at all. I clear my rear passage very loudly so that you will know what I mean.'

'My name is Stanthorpe from the *Daily Torygraph*. What is your British prisoner's name and how old is he?'

'We do not concern ourselves with such rabbit-ring questions. You can ask him if you want to know.'

'Can you hear me, sir? What is your name?'

'Eee, boot it's right grand to hear another British voice after all these years. Ah'm called Ramsbottom, Arthur Ramsbottom, Able Seaman, and Ah'm aged about sixty-five.'

'Mr Ramsbottom, can you explain how you happen to be here?'

‘Ay, lad ah can. I were a young’un on HMS *Venerable* in 1945 and I ’appened on the key to the wardroom booze and nutty locker. Woon day I got accidentally locked in there and spent – eee bloody years on the piss, reet grand it were. Then woon day eyes singin to meesen – a bit too loud like – and they kicks the bloody door down. Turns out to be these silly baskets. When they bought tut ship from Royal Navy they bought me too!’

‘Can you tell us how the ship has changed since 1945?’

‘Aye. They call it some bloody stupid name now. Summat like Vintichinkoo der Maya and put this powder-blue bloody flag at tut mast. In my day tut Captain were called Pumphery-Bandersnatch. Thought that were bloody stupid name until I heard Argentinean Captain’s name.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Sounds like cartoon character – has leg in plaster and goes round on crutches, medals all down ’is chest – called Speedy Gonzales.’

At this point Able Seaman Ramsbottom is hustled away by thirty-seven members of the special forces counter-terrorist squad armed with GPMGs and LAWs.”

On long voyages with little to do apart from fitness training, weapon drills and nightly mess-desk inspections, with an odd film thrown in, soldiers get bored. The difference between life in a barracks ashore and the extraordinarily odd life on board a warship is great, and those who have never been to sea have a lot to learn. The experienced people show the new hands the ropes… One of the usual tricks to be played upon the inexperienced is to run a ‘Splash-Target Coxswains course’.

Keen young commando lads on their first sea deployment are persuaded to volunteer for this fictitious course, and are trained up for as long as their credulity allows, to coxswain or ‘pilot’ a torpedo-like ‘splash-target’. ‘Splash-targets’ do exist, and are towed behind ships on a long cable to allow aircraft to practise bombing and strafing runs, or for the troops on board to fire their small arms. To want to pilot this target may seem like the most astonishing thing to be volunteering to do, but the young, newly fledged commando soldier is ready for anything, and he accepts that if there is a requirement and a training course then he’ll have a go. For everybody else, it helps relieves the boredom of a long voyage.

In this vein we managed to run a successful ‘Helo-casting’ course, in which a group of volunteers were trained to jump as if going into combat, from low-flying helicopters into the sea. Using our Lynx

aircraft, they'd have to hang from the skids until all were festooned below, in order to all drop into the sea at the same time as a group, after which they'd swim ashore for undisclosed further activities. (Helo-casting is actually done by the US Marines. We taught them advanced first aid, weapon-handling drills on our Armalites, plus plenty of serious upper-body physical training, so it wasn't a waste of time for them… We even managed to lure an officer into this charade, which culminated in a certificate-awarding ceremony with Captain Pitts on the rear flight deck. All our 'subjects' were very sporting about it, once they'd recovered from being so completely spoofed, even saying they'd learned quite a lot from it.

The outside world was becoming more complicated – and for us more worrying. The possibility of Soviet involvement (on behalf of Argentina) with orchestrated Cuban stirrings made uneasy listening. Mr Haig had left the UK to return to the US saying his peace-brokering efforts had been "inconclusive but both sides were pondering over some new ideas". But a UK government spokesman reported 'new and serious developments', and that 'optimism would be out of place'. Our morale took another dip.

Argentina announced that if Britain withdrew the Task Force, she'd withdraw her troops from the Falklands, but would no longer accept the relationship between the islands and Britain. London responded saying nothing short of an unconditional withdrawal by Argentina would be satisfactory. When eventually the UN weighed in, asking that Britain back-pedal to prevent bloodshed, Margaret Thatcher said firmly that Argentina must not profit from the use of force.

We were already anxious that the time we had for taking military action was very limited – just a few weeks before the antipodean winter set in. The Prime Minister sliced through the tangled web of obfuscation with this clear moral line. Additional offers to mediate by pro-Argentinian South American countries in the Organisation of American States, seemed to us another time-waster.

Already the time at sea was affecting our ability to fight. The tropical heat without showers or running water was increasingly uncomfortable. The wardroom bar, directly below the flight deck and ship's funnel, both of which were baked by the sun during the day, got particularly hot. The Captain, a man with a good sense of humour who loved being one of the boys rather than the isolated man at the top, 'discovered' that hot air rises and that the coolest place in the wardroom was sitting on the floor. So every night the officers lay on the wardroom floor, raising their heads every now and then to sip beer. Scrabble ceased because sweat made the pieces too slippery to pick up, and the floor was too crowded with reclining bodies to lay

the board out. It was not easy to sleep at night, more especially as the helicopter flight deck of *Sir Percivale* was just above our cabin, and every night they practised flying take-offs and landings from the completely darkened ship.

Every morning we gathered on the stern deck, leaning on the huge capstans that hauled in the greasy chains that lifted and lowered the rear ramp and cargo-loading entrance. In the fresh, salt air the white wake churned endlessly, dead straight when an experienced helmsman was on watch, or dog-legged when the boy was being taught. The sky was china blue and featureless.

The fleet was spread over a huge area in case of air attack. We merchant ships were surrounded by a 'wagon wheel' of unmarked warships which moved individually in a predetermined pattern around the wheel, to the eternal confusion of our helicopter pilots who were trying to land people on specific ships. Some mornings no ships at all were visible. A few days sailing out of Ascension, they all accelerated ahead, leaving the slow *Sir Percivale* plodding along with our ever-faithful escort HMS *Antelope*.

*Antelope* was a Type 21 frigate, particularly significant to us as it was equipped with a 4.5 inch Mark 8 gun. There were two sorts of naval gun that we were to control on Operation Corporate: the modern computerised, automated Mark 8's, and the older, slower, slightly shorter range but in some ways more reliable Mark 6's.

The job of our five-man 148 Battery teams was to infiltrate ashore and observe Argentine targets, whether from a mountain hideout, a concealed hole in a bog, walking forward with attacking infantry, or from a boat offshore or a helicopter. Despite the danger of this, our aim was to get to the best places from which to direct the naval gunfire to exactly where it would do most damage.

We carried the full range of military radios – HF, VHF and UHF, so we could communicate with the various military HQs and units and aircraft, as well as to the ships. We transmitted the co-ordinates of the targets we discovered ashore to the ship, along with precise orders as to the type of ammunition she was to fire, how much and when. We controlled where the shells landed, moved them round and switched fire to other targets. Controlling the fire, and for the ships to fire shells accurately whilst rolling around with the swell in pitch darkness, requires a lot of practice.

*Antelope's* crew were keen for us all to get together to run through procedures, and if possible fire their gun whilst we were still at Ascension. As a joining-up of the forces by which we'd take the fight to the enemy this was a meaningful and positive moment. It was also very enjoyable. We were received with great hospitality, enjoying their air conditioning, showers and the change of scene.

The captain and his ops room crew hadn't yet seen any ground maps of the Falklands. Their nautical charts showed only the outline of the coast and a few features like hills visible from the sea. I sent through my huge pack of 1:50,000 OS maps, plus the larger scale air control maps I'd obtained, using them to discuss everything I'd learned about the Islands.

We then spent a morning putting them through firing drills and talking about the type of land targets we thought we might attack. Their surgeon John Ramage, a friend who'd been the Medical Officer at Royal Marines Poole, installed me in his empty sickbay, the only spare bed on board.

The next morning Antelope's Lynx helicopter delivered us back to *Sir Percivale*. Nick and the boys had been presented with large, brown-paper sacks which they kept clutched to their chests. We were winched down individually, *Sir Percivale's* flight deck being too small for the Lynx to land. I went last, and the flight crew lowered me playfully until my feet trailed in the sea. The pilot then flew along from the bow along the length of *Sir Percival* towards the stern, and reeled me back up in time to land with soggy feet on the deck.

The brown-paper sacks were full of chilled beer cans and dubious magazines, donated by *Antelope's* matelots, who were touched by tales of our deprivation. We put the beer in *Sir Percivale's* meat store to stay cold for a special celebration when we reached Ascension.

On 16 April the *Oily Rag* informed us that the Argentine navy, with their carrier the *Veinticinco de Mayo* had put to sea "as a defensive measure". Mr Haig had again been to Buenos Aires, and President Reagan had spoken to the Argentine President General Galtieri. The Russians, after revelations of their supplying the Argentinians with information about the Task Force, reposted accusing the US of "acting in collusion with a colonial power and supplying intelligence material". The Common Market ban on Argentinean goods was applied, initially for one month, to affect some 25% of her exports.

In the rest of the world, tension and violence continued in Beirut, China was unhappy with the US over the supply of goods to Taiwan, recent arms finds in Zimbabwe led to some desertions from the army there, HM The Queen was formally to proclaim a new Canadian constitution in Ottawa, and Bjorn Borg would not play at either Wimbledon or Paris this year.

In that same issue of the *Oily Rag* I reported our visit to HMS *Antelope*. I'd heard of ships throwing non-vital furniture overboard, so I invented an orgy of destruction on *Antelope*:

"Yesterday I went across to HMS *Antelope*, the Type 21

frigate that is looking after us. These boys have got one or two problems, which I will try to explain. There seems to be something wrong with the victualling system, which has resulted in there being no water and stacks of beer. This means everyone is on the piss and no one is washing.

Whilst I was on board I overheard the First Lieutenant discussing their programme. Apparently when RN ships enter hostile areas they go into what they call 'Defence Watches'. This involves no one being allowed any sleep, everyone eating ham sandwiches and drinking mugs of cocoa, carrying a penknife with them at all times, and *throwing all the fittings over the side!* Well, can this be true? I investigated and it was.

They start traditionally, with the wardroom carpet and pictures, then the antelope's head followed by the wall plaques. The chief petty officers' mess beer-cooler is last of all.

'Sorry Captain, sir, if you could just stand up a second. Right, Leading Radio Operator, chuck that chair over the rail. You didn't want these photos of the wife and kids did you sir?'

When eventually this orgy of destruction is over (it includes shaving off hair, and beards if worn) the ship's officers put on their best uniforms and go to Divisions (this is a parade of the whole company). On Divisions everyone helps each other to rip the pockets and buttons off their best uniforms and jump up and down on their hats. Finally the captain, head completely shaven, has a handful of shit rubbed on his bald pate by the Master of Arms and snaps his telescope in two over his knee.

By this stage they are pretty pissed off and go round their ruined ship dressed in rags and tatters getting more and more angry.

'Right' they say, 'We're getting really pissed off now. You *Bastard Argentinians*. We're so totally going to sort you out now.'

'Look at the fucking state of my head! You *Bastards*, we're really going to make you pay for this, you *Bastards*.'

So when this happens, before we reach Ascension, don't be alarmed if you see wardroom furniture come bobbing past us, or main galley tables, or a darts board, or the film library. It's only Jack getting himself into the right frame of mind."

Rumour suggested that *Invincible* had indeed chucked her

wardroom carpets and piano into the sea, and was now working Defence Watches, with half the complete crew on duty all night, the ship remaining on full alert around the clock – as opposed to just the usual night-time skeleton crew plus teams of cleaners. As danger intensifies, life in a naval ship becomes more and more uncomfortable, and the psychological effect is enormous. In actuality, *Antelope* was about to follow *Invincible's* example as far as Defence Watches went. As for throwing things overboard, they had almost reconciled themselves to the possibility of their sacred antelope's head being jettisoned.

Another element of naval preparation which did actually take place, came to the fleet by courtesy of the French armed forces, when most of the Type 21 frigates on their way south were able to practice anti-aircraft drills against *Armée de l'Air* Super Etendard jets of the type used by the Argentine FAA, as we sailed parallel to the West African coast. These drills were to prove invaluable, and life-saving.

Nearing Ascension Island, I wound up my Buenos Aires saga by having the Argentine fleet sail under the command of Speedy Gonzales. Admiral Enrico Frigorifico was not available to take command in person, as he was now in hospital with popped cartilages in both knees and a slipped disc because of the weight of his medals.

But now the Task Force might well come under Argentine attack. The time for frivolous invention was over.

# Chapter 4. Ascension Island

Slow old *Sir Percivale* arrived at Ascension one day behind the other ships, early on a beautiful sunny morning. We awoke to the unaccustomed sound of the anchor being dropped. Dozens of ships surrounded us: merchant tankers, car ferries, sleek Type 21 frigates, the larger and more sinister-looking DLGs (Destroyers Light with Guided Missiles), RFAs like ourselves, as well as the POL (petrol, oil and lubricants) tanker versions, and deep-sea salvage tugs. There were also a few American ships, no doubt bemused at this ultra-quiet, mid-ocean backwater becoming suddenly so busy.

The island itself was made of very solid looking pinnacles of black volcanic lava, sloping gently upwards from the shore to form foothills to the incongruous grandeur of Green Mountain, which dominates the whole island. The shore is indented with some sandy beaches, but only a few places where heavy surf permits landing. The foreshore was covered with every kind of radio mast, from dish antennae to long pylon runs of cable for long-distance HF communications. To the south streams of naval helicopters were clattering in and out of the tiny island's single-strip airfield.

Originally, and presumably ironically, it had been called 'Wideawake Airfield' – a very appropriate name now. Military aircraft had taken over: Phantom jet fighters, huge old Vulcan jet bombers, Nimrods, Hercules and Victor Tankers.

In a dramatic contrast to the barren oven-baked moonscape of the rest of Ascension, at the island's centre Green Mountain was misty and ethereal, topped off with its own localised cloud. The sudden upward movement of moist air from the ocean, condensing into cloud near the top of one of the few bits of high ground between Africa and America, causes a miniature rain shadow on the upper slopes of the mountain. Vivid green vegetation caps it like mint topping on an ice-cream cone. Sometimes the mist completely enshrouded that implausibly green paradise, which, viewed from the crowded heat of the ships at anchor or from the conical piles of arid black pumice stone below, had a definite Shangri-La sort of attraction.

After breakfast we leaned on the rail, enjoying seeing dry land for the first time in a fortnight. The calm water around the ship was very clear, blue and alive with fish. But soon the well-regulated bowels of military men and the very basic plumbing of the ship (the same as BR trains) made us wish the water wasn't quite so clear. Suddenly large numbers of piranha-like black fish appeared, voraciously seizing every morsel, then lurked hopefully near the outlets. They were immediately christened 'shit-fish'.

The Chinese stewards rushed off excitedly, returning with fishing lines, with which they were horrifyingly successful. They fish at every possible opportunity. As only the senior Chinaman (the Bo'sun) spoke and understood English, from that moment onwards, fish on the menu was treated with suspicion.

We inflated our Gemini assault boat, ostensibly to test our engines, but actually so we could pay a visit to *Canberra* when she arrived. We were curious. There were rumours of the normal cruising staff still being on board – including females. After the cheerful rigours of *Sir Percivale,* and having invented so much about her in the *Oily Rag,* I wanted to see for myself.

We were also keen to take proper exercise on solid land. We could see a stone jetty with steps, petrol bowser and cranes at the end of the rocky pinnacle nearest to the buildings of the main settlement Georgetown. We tied up the Gemini at the Fort Thornton pier and went ashore wearing webbing (with lots of water bottles), shorts and boots. Des, being pale skinned, wore a jungle hat.

As we walked up the road in the direction of Lady Hill which we'd decided to hack up and down a few times, we passed a long, two-storied building with a veranda round the top storey, from which much chat and conviviality could be heard. Friendly voices assailed us, as before in equally unexpected, remote and unlikely places. Members of 148 Battery Sergeant John Rycroft and RS (Radio Supervisor) George Booth were leaning over the rail with cold pints of beer in their hands. Resisting the strong inclination not to bother with the march, we tramped off bravely into the heat haze.

Up close, the black pinnacles were loosely granulated like very fine coke. In an off-shore wind, the ships at anchor in the bay were soon covered with black granules.

We flogged to the top of Lady Hill, running most of the way, until the heat became almost unbearable. The summit had an unmanned US radar station, and there we paused for the view, looking across to the centre of the island where Green Mountain disappeared upward into the mist.

John Rycroft and George Booth had come ashore from *Fearless* the day before, setting themselves up on the first-floor veranda of the 'Exiles Club'. They'd been 'refreshing' themselves for most of the morning. The club was packed with the green-denim uniforms, some flown out from the UK who'd been on the island for a while, plus newcomers like us, and several friends I'd not seen for years. It seemed to me like a film – a cross between the bar in Star Wars, and a comedy about dying, this being a celestial waiting-room in the middle of nowhere, pending the completion of entry formalities to the after-life.

The Exiles Club was also too much fun to last. Something was bound to go wrong. The military 'System' would object, or some clown would misbehave and spoil it for everybody else.

I was completely wrong. Only when it was realised that in a few days the island's entire supply of beer for that year would have been drunk, did Brigadier Julian Thompson reluctantly ban us from the 'Exiles Club' – to the club manager's keen disappointment. This for me was the first of many examples of how nobody gets uptight about trivia when military operations are for real.

That night we decided to drink the beer the matelots on *Antelope* had so generously donated. Some of our huge stash of cans, carried like swag in a blanket, was brought up from the meat store then wrapped in a nest of further blankets to keep cool. The strategic place to hold what was going to be a most civilised piss-up was the deck immediately outside the wardroom, facing Ascension and the dying sun, conveniently close to the nearest heads (loo).

The best knees-ups start very slowly, almost by accident, and evolve with gentle sipping and the reflective broaching of crisp, fresh cans, with that most satisfactory sound as the ring is pulled. We leaned over the rail and watched the sun go down, chatting quietly. People passed by, were offered a can, then stayed, adding to the conversation and going into the wardroom to buy a round of cold cans in return.

Leaning over the rail in the dark, staring down into the phosphorescent water, we reflected on what the future might have in store. We had no idea, but that night I decided to resist any further attempts by the hierarchy to rearrange the composition of my Forward Observation team, as our Battery Commander had disingenuously suggested he might in recompense for breaking up my original team. Nick Allin and I were pleased with the way our training and preparation was going, and we, as a team, were happy with each other, which was the most important of all.

SS *Canberra* arrived, bringing amongst others the majority of 148 Battery. From a distance, she still looked like a luxury liner preparing to disembark tourists, but unlike us she had no boats, so none of our comrades were going anywhere. We therefore mounted a mission to investigate the reality of *Canberra's* imagined delights.

This started badly, as I was the only person with clean military uniform. As we motored towards the liner's busy-looking embarkation hatch, we were astonished to see fierce-looking duty sergeants wearing red sashes, crisply ironed shirts and maroon berets, wielding shiny pace sticks.

We were entering another world.

Captain Bob Harmes, a recent arrival in 148 Battery, having just been promoted to captain from being RSM of 7RHA the artillery's' parachute regiment, was horrified at our scruffiness, and attempted to discipline a couple of my team as they tied up our Gemini – until I told him to stop.

While they went off with the other 148 guys to borrow clean shirts and ironed trousers, I tried to explain, but Bob simply didn't believe my account of conditions on *Sir Percivale*. He was also unhappy at my having contradicted his authority – with me being equally unhappy at his having attempted to contradict mine. I told him to concentrate on more important things, which probably didn't help. When we were finally able to wander round *Canberra,* I understood the reason for Bob's horror at our condition. (25 years later, at a reunion dinner, Bob apologised to me about this, and said several very complimentary things about FO1, which I very greatly appreciated.)

The liner was more like my fictional portrayal in the *Oily Rag* than I could possibly have imagined. Most of her normal crew were still on board – including the women. A group of married naval helicopter pilots (seeming more licentious than the bachelors) had 'befriended' and taken charge of the female members of the Purser's admin staff, who at that stage were still allowed to mix with the military – but only the officers of course.

The first-class cocktail lounge below the bridge – the 'Crow's Nest Bar', with cocktail shakers and crushed-ice machine was in normal cruise ship operation, rigorously testing the skills of the barmen. Mass cocktail creation operations ensued, until the unheard-off calamity of the more exotic drinks running out. But now after a fortnight, the novelty had worn off, even for the likes of the helicopter pilots, and now the ship had a very crisp military air about it – particularly when compared to poor old *Sir Percivale*.

*Canberra's* recreational facilities were in full use, the quarter-mile-long promenade deck crowded with crocodiles of runners, often wearing full combat kit festooned with equipment. This military promenading was buckling the wooden planking, and metal plates were bowing from constant heavy pounding. The carpets had disappeared in Southampton, and the entire length of the ballroom stripped bare for conversion into a *MASH*-type surgical hospital. Piles of oxygen cylinders, cardboard boxes of dressings, sutures, tubes, blades, syringes and battlefield medical paraphernalia lay heaped around the dance floors, against the pianos and where the tombola machine stood under dust covers.

Part of this medical conversion required *Canberra* to become a support helicopter-operating base. The Crow's Nest bar contained a

spider's web of scaffolding supporting the steel plates of the new helicopter flight deck above, looking like the pit-propped gallery of a mine. Metal ramps ran down from the flight deck to the ballroom, for moving the wounded in stretcher trolleys from the CASEVAC (Casualty Evacuation) helicopters. Enthusiastic use of cutting torch and large hammer in the few days before sailing had covered over the forrad swimming pool. The steel flight deck had been prefabricated ashore, the last bits assembled at sea after the ship had sailed, with the shipwrights being flown off as *Canberra* sailed past Gibraltar (no doubt to their relief). Their oxy-acetylene gear lay on deck where they'd abandoned it.

At Ascension further 'robust' marine construction work was being done, the most notable being the skipper of *Atlantic Conveyer* cutting off the entire front end of his ship to make a large enough flight deck to allow Harrier jump jets to take off. I hoped captaining an aircraft carrier was fulfilment of a childhood dream. As a vast amount of steel plate was dropped into the sea, this transition was achieved with astonishing rapidity. However, the first Harrier we watched landing onto this new flight deck looked alarmingly likely to end up in the sea.

*Canberra's* normal luxury cruise shops were still open. The assembled soldiery could select from a full range of Pierre Cardin scarves, luxury perfumes, and souvenirs. The hair-stylist however, had completely changed his outlook on life, and now produced what must have been one of the most stylish 'short back and sides' ever experienced by the British Army.

There had been a few 'incidents' between male crew members and embarked military, the odd black eye but all was well. Rumour had it that a few crew members had quit the ship for various reasons at Ascension, but it's very much to the credit of *Canberra's* crew that there were no unredeemable problems in these extraordinarily stressful circumstances.

The contrast between conditions on *Canberra* and those on *Sir Percivale* could not have been greater. Somehow living under the far more basic conditions of the RFAs and the warships, in what for us were familiar circumstances, kept things properly in perspective. At least we on *Sir Percivale* could only be moved to a better ship – it could hardly get worse for us.

The148 Battery guys were relieved to be moving out of *Canberra*, into the RFAs that were soon to take them southwards. They were to join the small 'Op Paraquat' force to re-capture South Georgia.

The conditions under which battles are planned, commanded and fought can be summed up by the single cliché 'the fog of war' – the

one confounding factor you cannot include in training exercises. Armchair strategists guided by the news, and historians with critical hindsight rarely understand this. The fog of war obscures some things and not others, suddenly lifts then just as suddenly falls again, makes you think you are going faster and then slower, or puts you into a dangerous state of false security. The only way to deal with it is to be infinitely flexible, which involves constant changes of plan. In turn this demands resignation and a sense of humour from both the troops being buggered about and from the 'loggies' (logisticians), who in a nightmare of eternal chaos must plan for every eventuality.

We were each of us planners, logisticians – even brigade commanders, but of course what was really being planned was way above our heads and beyond our ken. It was a tense period of waiting and we talked about everything imaginable. But a worm's eye view is all that any individual has of any war – except for the senior commander, who has his own very specific limitations of perception.

During this these final preparations, we talked endlessly about strategy.

When attacking an enemy position you need a superiority of at least three to one. The arithmetic ratios increase if your enemy has well-prepared defences, particularly if you have to assault from the sea. This is known as an 'opposed landing', and because of the probability of suffering high casualties while leaving the ship and before becoming established on the shore, requires very much more than the usual three-to one-advantage. The textbooks suggest seven-to-one. If you don't have such superiority, you have to use deception and brilliant planning to attack the enemy in small chunks, so as to increase their relative numbers, thus conforming to the ratio. They key to this is concentrating troops and fire power in the key places.

But for getting ashore in the Falklands, the Task Force had only sufficient helicopters and landing craft to assault with one battalion – flying in one company by helicopter and the remainder by sea using landing craft. Of course we could bring in further reinforcements after this first wave, but strictly by the application of military mathematics, we could only do an opposed landing against one enemy company at the most. Thus through our own basic deductions, it seemed we were not going to attempt a direct, full-frontal assault on Port Stanley – thank goodness.

We practised assault landings interminably (or so it seemed) at Ascension, which was to be invaluable for the partially opposed landing we were eventually to do at San Carlos. I discovered afterwards that the option of a full-frontal assault by sea and by a *coup de main* helicopter force was still being actively considered by the planners at that stage, but was moving down the list in terms of its

probability.

HMS *Antelope*, the Type 21 gunship who's Company had already been so hospitable, asked us to fire their gun, so we flew across to them for the day. The fire would be at smoke flares dropped by helicopter into the sea to the north of Ascension. I would adjust the shells onto the smoke flares from the rear of the aircraft, while Nick and the rest of the team worked with the ship's navigator and PEWO (principal executive weapons officer), so that the ships operations room staff would understand what to do when we called on them to fire for real.

The first part of the morning was spent running through the computer and operation-rooms drills, and talking to the pilot and observer of the Lynx about the best way to do the job. I wanted to let them do as much of the firing as possible, thinking ahead to when it might be in my interests to have a helicopter crew who were confident and able enough to adjust gunfire on my behalf.

In the hazy, tropical sun-glare, the featureless ocean became like a greasy mirror, painful to the eyes. The firing practice went well, although the first few smoke flare targets failed to burn, and when they did ignite, were hard to see. The Lynx helicopter landed back on board and we stayed for dinner, being delivered back to *Fearless* by Gemini assault boat later that evening.

The huge re-stowing programme had started as soon as the Task Force arrived at Ascension. The choppy mid Atlantic swell bustled with 'Mexe' floats and landing craft, with streams of helicopters above. The logisticians worked round the clock to get everything reloaded in something like the reverse order in which they were likely to have to emerge when we landed.

In war nothing can be achieved without good logistics. 3 Commando Brigade was very fortunate to have the uniquely experienced Commando Logistic Regiment. With no firm operational plan, the loggies were giving the 'ops' planners as wide a set of options as possible by reloading to allow as 'flexible' an offload as possible.

The 'reload' had to be got as near correct as possible at Ascension Island, as once we sailed south, the rough seas would not allow anything but the most limited reshuffle of troops, and hardly any reallocation of the mountains of stores. Even the likely theatre of operations was uncertain – from the snow, ice and Antarctic mountains of South Georgia, to the wet moorland of the Falklands – totally different places in which to fight, requiring different stores and equipment.

To further complicate the restowage programme, the commando

and parachute battalions needed to practise fly-offs and landing-craft assaults. These were conflicting requirements for the limited helicopter lift capacity, and clogged up the stores loading routes through the ships with troops waiting to be flow off. But nevertheless, if we were to do this for real, the complete routine of battle preparation had to be practised: assembly drills, the assault routes through the labyrinth of ships' passages, hatchways and ladders to the landing-craft bays and flight decks, the calling-forward of the platoons and companies in the correct order for the assault plan, then getting them into the right boat or helicopter at the right time.

The rehearsals started in slow time by day without heavy equipment, working up to doing it at night carrying full combat loads – humping huge bergens through bolted-down hatches (to minimise flooding if the ship is hit). Both troops and the ships' companies needed to be totally familiar with all this. Pilots and landing craft coxswains had to go through the routines until everybody could do it slickly, in the dark, in bad weather and heavy seas, and possibly against enemy opposition.

On 21 May, the actual landings at San Carlos ran late because of many unforeseen difficulties, for example, a paratrooper falling into one of the landing craft and breaking his pelvis. Without the practising at Ascension, these delays would have extended long into the next day, with the certainty that troop-carrying ships would have been hit by the Argentine air force.

For the proposed landings, I was to be in a helicopter, flying well ahead of the assaulting wave, directing naval gunfire and Harrier strikes onto enemy positions. We practised the sort of flying that would give the helicopter a chance of surviving, while allowing me to set the targets. This involved sickening turns and dives, while flying very low indeed.

FO1 got out and about as best we could, off *Sir Percivale* and on to the island to make further long marches in the blistering heat, to fire our weapons on a makeshift range and to scrounge the odd dinner on board *Canberra*. We were told to move across to *Fearless*, but couldn't do this immediately as our equipment was still buried in the hold of *Sir Percivale,* and in the restowage programme could not be 'excavated' from the pile for several more days.

There were panics when we were told that *Fearless* was sailing south, including one when our source of misinformation thought that her normal water replenishment trip to sea (to get clean sea water for her desaliniser) was her actually sailing for the South Atlantic. On this occasion, FO1 was literally set adrift in our Gemini one mile off Ascension at night with no fuel.

But eventually we were able to get all our gear out of *Sir Percivale's* vehicle deck and flown across to *Fearless*. We followed in our Gemini, taking leave of all the friends we'd made.

On *Fearless*, the large number of officers in the 3 Commando Brigade HQ had filled all the usual officers' accommodation. So we were put into one of the Other Ranks mess-decks – 'Four Mike One' (4M1). Naturally, whenever there had to be a fire practice in a mess-deck, it was 4M1 into which the smoke-canisters were thrown, or the fire-hoses 'accidentally' let off. Officers, particularly if Army, are considered fair game by sailors.

At one point in all this confused activity, I was required on board SS *Canberra* to attend an Orders Group given by Lt Colonel H Jones, the Commanding Officer of 2 Para. As an unknown person amid a large group of Paras, I chatted quietly to the couple of people I did know, then stood up with everyone else when the CO arrived. He was a small, terrier-like man possessed of great energy, talking animatedly with everyone. Somebody thought to introduce me to him, but he seemed distracted, so I probably didn't register with him. So as he swept away to attend to more urgent matters, I sloped off for a large and civilised lunch at the 148 Battery table, before returning in our Gemini to the less congenial but more familiar environment of HMS *Fearless*.

Despite being regularly awash with water and very crowded, 4M1 was physically more comfortable than friendly old *Sir Percivale*. I slept at the top of a bank of three bunks, directly above an unfamiliar naval padre who couldn't stand the close living (and was found more congenial accommodation). The bottom bunk belonged to Brigadier Julian Thompson's ADC (Aide-de-Camp), who was much very smarter than the rest of us (not difficult), and far more serious (also not terribly difficult), with what struck me as the most splendid name 'Montefiori'. I was reading a comic but very disreputable book by a writer with the pen name 'Kyril Bonfiglioli', who I also liked. With his head by my feet, the overwhelmed padre's replacement was a cheerful REME captain Trevor Wilkins, a computer buff who I knew from my days as an officer cadet at Sandhurst. Trevor's wife sent him computer magazines, which he left in the wardroom for others to read. Trevor hadn't spotted that she'd filled in the advertising coupons with personal messages – until we showed him of course. Trevor festooned his bunk with smalls, like bunting.

There was also Flight Lieutenant Dennis Marshall-Hadsell, an RAF Phantom Navigator and now the Commando Brigade's main forward air controller. With me, Dennis formed the core of a small and very select deck-quoits-playing club, which met before tea every afternoon

on the upper Sea Cat deck.

There were eighteen others crammed into mess-deck Four Mike One. It was never particularly cluttered or claustrophobic because we were all used to it, and because everything had to be stowed away for action stations every morning. When a ship gets hit, anything loose becomes dangerous, and catches fire. The stowage of kit was practised and inspected *ad nauseam* until it was automatic.

But an ever-present tannoy blasted forth from a loudspeaker in one corner of 4M1. It should have had a volume control, but ours, being in the officers' mess-deck, had probably been sabotaged. Because the tannoy is a key part of a warship's organization, it couldn't simply be disconnected when we were trying to sleep. I taped a towel across it, which at least muted its stridency.

'Pipes' are broadcast from the bridge, and are made by ringing the Bo'sun's mate, who with the permission of the officer of the watch, picks up a hand microphone and speaks to the whole ship. But like guards on British Rail commuter trains, the volume is usually too loud, and his accent incomprehensible. There were certain particularly disliked pipes that would be made many times each day:

"D'yer hear there. For Exercise, for Exercise, for Exercise. Fire, Fire, Fire."

"There is a fire in 4M1 mess-deck space. Secure all watertight doors aft of 2 Kilo. Fire party to assemble at the base of the 2 Kilo hatch. Damage-control party stand by."

"D'you hear there. This is the Commander speaking. There have been many useful comments about the pipes being made. I know many of you are unhappy about unnecessary pipes, and the use of irritating clichés. I've hoisted in the point about this. I'm going to cut out all the clichés and get straight to the nitty-gritty. But more of that later."

"D'you hear there. This is the officer of the watch speaking. There have been far too many unnecessary pipes being made which disturbs everybody as well as cluttering up the smooth running of the bridge. I ask you to co-operate to reduce pipes to only those that are strictly necessary. That is all."

And a particular favourite:

"Hands to flying-stations, hands to flying-stations. No more gash to be ditched. No smoking or naked lights."

There was one particular Bo'sun's mate who we felt did rather more than his fair share of duty, in a high-pitched 'George Formby' accent that particularly grated on our nerves. Hic classic pipe, repeated many times every day, was:

"The AOO is requested to go to the AOR. The AOO."

Translated into English this reads: "the Amphibious Operations

Officer is requested to go to the Amphibious Operations Room". He is "requested" and not ordered, as the AOO is senior to the person who authorised the pipe.

After a delay, and no AOO appearing in the AOR, the Bosun's mate would then decide to add a sense of urgency to the pipe:

"The AOO is to go to the AOR. The AOO."

Someone on the bridge would then tell him that he couldn't order the AOO to do anything, so we'd get a third version:

"D'yer hear there. Disregard that last pipe. The AOO is *requested* to go to the AOR. The AOO. That is all."

By this stage in this oft-repeated round of pipes we'd be singing, in George Formby voices:

"The AOO's not in the AOR, and I'm still cleaning winders."

Lieutenant Montefiori, the Brigadier's ADC, was also a key man – like the AOO. But the ADC had succeeded where we had failed. From the constant piping that went on for him, he must have discovered a room without a loudspeaker. We heard this pipe many, many times each day, with the Bo'sun having no qualms about expressing his irritation:

"Lieutenant Montefiori is to report to the Brigadier's day cabin. Lieutenant Montefiori."

These were the sounds of HMS *Fearless* at war.

The easiest way to forget these cramped and uncomfortable circumstances was to slip into a routine. The day would begin with the pipe: 'Call the Hands'; which actually sounded like this: "Call Thee 'Ans, Call Thee 'Ans, Call Thee 'Ans."

We would get up in relays to use the row of washbasins, pack up bedding, and stow the clutter. Breakfast entailed quite a long journey, up two ladders, along *Fearless'* main side passage and up another ladder. This took you past the beer-smelling door of the chief petty officer's mess, and the gunroom – a mess-room traditionally for the junior officers, which was now sealed up and guarded, housing the intelligence cell.

After breakfast and the 8 a.m. World Service news, the morning would be taken up with whatever work was needed. Lunch and more BBC news, then in the afternoon a very comprehensive PT session on the flight-deck, or the Sea Cat deck aft, or the steep metal ramp down to the tank deck and dock. FO1 would normally do that together, although for variety John Rycroft often came and took the session to give us a break from me.

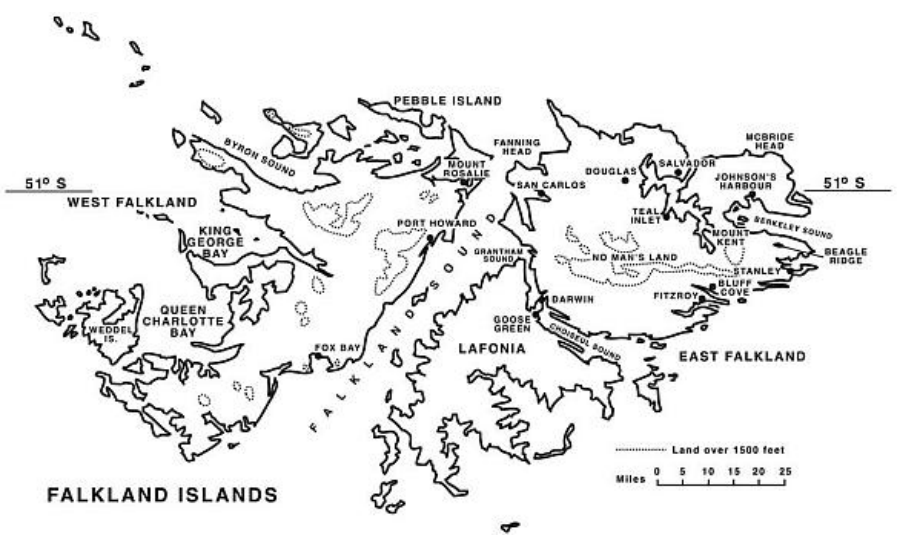
We were getting quite good mail with very little delay from the UK, so I did a lot of letter-writing. The mail came at 1830 and was the high point of the day. The 'postie' always had plenty of helpers to sort

the contents of the bulging blue sacks that after a delivery would block the narrow gangway past his office.

In the evenings the wardroom was jammed and we ate in two sittings: the more junior of us between seven and half past, and the senior ones after that. For some doubtless traditional reason that escapes me, the bar closed until they'd finished eating. The beer was terrible and sometimes the ice machine broke, so decisions about what to drink were far from easy. When the Pimms ran out, the situation became serious. It was very hot even with air-conditioners going flat out. For historical reasons, the restrictions on drinking that applied to the other ranks (in theory two or three cans per night), did not apply in the officers or Petty Officers' Wardrooms. But the end result was much the same for everyone – drink enough to seem impaired and you were in serious trouble.

After dinner our group were in the habit of drinking the same thing, at one point Irish Mist until it ran out (thankfully). When the senior officers finished eating, the chairs would be arranged in rows, comfy armchairs at the front, for The Film. The Commander and senior officers sat at the front, and I slipped into the pecking order at about the fourth or fifth row on a hard-backed dining-room chair. We would watch the film using the changing of reels to recharge glasses. At the end, the bar would close and we would totter back down to the 4M1, being very careful with the ladders.

***Falkland Islands Map***



# Chapter 5. Our War Begins

On Saturday, 26 April we heard South Georgia had been retaken – by Operation Paraquat, featuring 148 Battery and the use of naval gunfire. This caused jubilation, plus a hope that the Falkland Argies might be ready to surrender by the time we got to them, although no one counted on this. The poor performance of an isolated garrison being set upon by what must have seemed to be an overwhelming force, was hardly an example on which to base future operations.

The hope of Argentine lack of resolve was to flavour the two first actions of our Falklands landing: the SBS operation for Fanning Head that we were to be part of, and the Paras' battle for Darwin and Goose Green. Nevertheless, with the taking of South Georgia the war had certainly started, and it seemed everything we were doing had entered a new dimension.

On Monday night, after reports of unidentified and possibly Argentine merchant vessels in the Ascension Island area, the Navy became twitchy about the possibility of an attack on our anchorage. The intelligence people advised that Argentina had bought at least two mini-submarines and some chariot-type submersibles that could be used to get into the bay at night to place limpet mines on ships' hulls. The Argentine Navy had one Guppy-class sub in good working order, which remained unaccounted for. So when strange sonar reflections were detected, we suffered an inevitable series of submarine scares.

The first of these submarine scares took place just after the news of the South Georgia surrender. An attack on the Task Force at this stage would have been an appropriate Argentine counter-stroke.

Just after 4 a.m. the duty sonar operator heard a foreign sonar emission and sounded the alert. The klaxons went off for the first time without the caveat that it was 'For Exercise'. In what was to become the established pattern, HQ staff grabbed their respirators, lifejackets with something warm to wear, and rushed up the ladders and through the hatches that were already being closed and screwed down, to man the Amphibious Operations Room. The ship shut down to only the faint red glow of its emergency lighting system. Sailors went to their fire-hose positions, stretcher-party mustering points and first-aid posts. Everyone was wearing their 'anti-flash' – the white asbestos hood and gloves that were soon to prevent so many serious burns when ships were hit.

We remained, like the others on the ship without specific jobs to do, languishing in our mess-deck. We were almost exactly amidships

and well below the water line – the ideal torpedo impact area, but safe from Exocet missiles, which are programmed to hit amidships, nine feet below the top of the ship's radar silhouette. All the hatches were screwed down tight, and to escape required the opening of four hatches and the negotiation of several tortuous corridors and ladders – the claustrophobia of an iron grave.

Four young sailors were unfortunate to have the bilges underneath 4M1 as their action station. They would arrive breathless pulling on sweaters and anti-flash hoods, armed with torches and a large hammer, to scramble down the ladder into the dank bilges below. We screwed down the hatch, their pale faces looking up at us in the red gloom. From their position standing on the hull of the ship, if they heard the sounds of frogmen trying to place mines, they were to give the alarm by using their hammer to bash on the hatch that we'd screwed down tight after them.

The tannoy burst into life again: "D'you hear there, this is the Captain speaking. We have picked up what seems to be unidentifiable sonar operating from the west. You all know that there is a submarine and swimmer threat, and so we are going to initiate full preventative measures, which will include dropping scare charges every three-quarters of an hour or so. Those of you below the water line may find these quite loud at first. We will remain at action stations until first light and then revert to 'Damage control state Two, condition Yankee modified'. That is all."

These damage control states were a mystery to most of us, but eventually we learned what they meant, in specific terms of their effect on us – of hatches bolted tight, and companionways sealed.

The first of the swimmer scare-charges, fizzing-fused lumps of high explosive thrown into the sea, was shockingly loud, and we waited, sweating in the darkness, for the next one. The air-conditioners and anything else that makes a noise were turned off lest an enemy sonar operator pick it up. (I presumed the attack swimmer-deterring explosions, because of their severity hindered rather than helped our enemy sonar man.)

After a couple of minutes of this terrible tension, we heard a hesitant, metallic 'tap tap' on the hatch leading down to the bilges. I got off my bunk to see what the problem was, unscrewing the hatch bolts and lifting the heavy, steel plate. A pale, worried little face, two eyes staring out of an anti-flash hood looked up at me. The three other young sailors were below him, hanging on to the top of the ladder that went down thirty feet to the wet bilge bottom.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"There's been an explosion – we heard it just now, outside the hull. Is everything all right?"

They hadn't heard the captain's broadcast and had thought we were under attack, but had been debating whether they should bother anybody or risk alerting an enemy sonar operator by banging on the hatch to find out what was happening.

We were annoyed by the news from home. It seemed as though some of our politicians were trying to make political capital out of the situation. Any sign of weakness in Britain we thought would give hope to Galtieri, strength from the merest hint of British lack of resolve. On the other hand I felt there was also a danger in forcing him into a corner, from which like a wounded bear he would have no alternative but to fight.

At Royal Marines Poole, where the Falkland Island Garrison Naval Party 8901 were trained, throughout the previous year we'd listened with growing anxiety to the Parliamentary debate on whether to scrap the Royal Navy's icebreaker *Endurance*. The immediate reaction of more senior officers, who were already concerned that NP8901 was too small to be of any actual use, was that the Falklands was certain to be invaded. It was well known that the Argentine military academy regularly practised the invasion of the 'Malvinas'. Getting rid of the relatively small expense of HMS *Endurance* was certain to be taken as an indicator of Britain's lack of interest and resolve in the South Atlantic. And now, with this prediction come true, the same politicians whose penny-pinching had so thoughtlessly contributed to this crisis were urging us ever closer to bloodshed.

We knew Galtieri had seriously miscalculated his 'Malvinas' project, which put us in a classic bind: if we appeared feeble, he would certainly stay there. But if we were tough, far from forcing him to admit his mistake and withdraw, would pride oblige him to fight? The whole adventure seemed so large-scale, unreal and unlikely, that we were still thinking in terms of this crisis being resolved without us having to land in the Falklands.

So far the Task Force had struck several blows in the battle: Port Stanley airfield had been bombed twice by the RAF, a psychological operation that heartened us rather than disheartened the Argies, as the damage was repaired overnight and did not affect the usability of the runway. South Georgia had fallen easily, and we'd captured a submarine at Grytviken. Several aircraft had been shot down (Mirages, Pucaras and a Canberra bomber) with several FPB's (fast patrol boats) and a second submarine damaged. The bombing of Port Stanley was followed-up by daytime naval shelling of the racecourse fuel dump and the airfield.

On Tuesday, 4 May, sitting in the Wardroom, I heard we'd sunk Argentine cruiser *General Belgrano*. I went to the operations rooms to

read about it in the Signals Log. A large loss of life was reported. It was supposed the other Argie ships in the area had fled in case they were the next targets, leaving the crew of the cruiser to their fate. The cold seas would quickly kill anyone in the water.

When *Belgrano* went down there was universal sadness and disgust on *Fearless* that the whole thing had got to this stage.

Over the next few days we were to see crass, jingoistic UK newspaper headlines. As I wrote in my diary for that day (Tuesday 4 May):

> "My feelings are not of the glee reported by the idiot press on board *Canberra*, but more akin to the Royal Marine Colonel who, when told of the sinking by a press man, used a four-letter expletive and returned to his office to carry on working. Of course there are clowns who are pleased. They seem to be the ones least likely to be personally involved in future fighting.
>
> These vindictive headlines were immediately followed by hypocritical, sanctimonious questionings of why the Argentine cruiser had been attacked, allegedly whilst withdrawing from the area of operations, and even, according to some reports, as it returned to its home port.
>
> To us, shortly to be experiencing the cold and bad weather of the South Atlantic for ourselves, it seemed as if all these people safe at home had no interest in our welfare. The *Belgrano* was a very dangerous warship, with Exocet missiles and enormous guns that could sink many of our ships. It further rankled that we were shortly to face the dangers and inclement enormity of the South Atlantic thanks to the talk and lack of action of many of the people now involved in all this vacuous discussion."

The lines of battle were drawn over the next few days. Events became an odd mixture of momentous news and trivial activities. The five of us again went ashore with our rifles, pistols and webbing. We marched across the island, zeroed our weapons at a makeshift range, marched back, then had a swim from the beach. That night Dennis Marshall-Hasdell introduced us to Harvey Wallbangers before dinner, as the draught lemonade for Pimms had run out. I was up in the AOR looking rather blearily through the signals log (thanks to the Harvey Wallbangers) when we learned of HMS *Sheffield* having been Exoceted and sunk. Very rapidly we learned of the number of deaths, which was a great blow to us all. I suddenly understood the importance of morale, and how it fluctuates so wildly according to the news. My

diary noted:

> *Thursday, 6 May*: The sinking of HMS *Sheffield* was a very low point that shook us all. It looks now as though 30 men have died. What a terrible waste.
>
> My morale is not very high at present as I feel we are being premature in rushing off to invade. We cannot do this whilst there is still a risk from Argie air, which means bombing mainland Argentine airfields, which I hope is politically unacceptable. Therefore why all the talk of landing? [I was thinking in terms of a naval blockade and possibly a battle at sea.]
>
> After lunch Dennis and I decided to cut each other's hair so as to avoid being scalped by the Chinaman who, to add insult to undoubted injury, charges too much. We thought of taking a trip across to *Canberra* for an appointment with André but apparently he's booked up for at least three days and we may well have sailed south by then. Dennis in fact did mine quite well but chickened out when I set about doing his.
>
> Yesterday I sat on the upper deck, which we soldiers refer to as 'the roof', got red in the sun and did my exercises. An officer quite new to the Commando Brigade rushed up to me saying, 'Come quickly and look at this'. He was going to do a parachute jump later in the day out of a helicopter into the sea (for fun, which as we did that sort of thing rather too often for my liking, I found a somewhat mysterious concept) and said he'd just seen something that worried him. He pulled me over to the guardrail talking about being eaten by sharks, gesticulating downwards.
>
> It was an incredible sight – at least 40 porpoises in twos and threes converging on the bow of the ship, bobbing rhythmically right out of the water and blowing air from the breathing holes in the tops of their heads. They were a really beautiful sight, quiet, curious children from another world."

The practice fly-offs took up most of my time. I wrote in my diary:

> "Up at 0400 to bolt down the hatches and go to action stations again. The matelots put on their anti-flash and let off smoke grenades to exercise the fire and damage-control teams.
>
> We go up to the wardroom for the mandatory pre-flight breakfast to find that the stroppy petty officer steward was

using action stations as an excuse not to produce early breakfasts. We 'explain' to him that it is only a practice and that certainly 'on the day' the cookers would be turned off because of the fire hazard, but that in practice exercises you do not risk air accidents at night by having hypoglycaemic air crew (who have not had their breakfasts as they are by regulations required to have done). As we also complained to the Chief Petty Officer, who is a pillar of strength amid much distracting confusion, this did not happen again – *and* we got breakfast.

We eased along to Flyco [Flight Command] to climb aboard Major Peter Cameron's Scout, but there were no lifejackets. The deckies were also being difficult (it being early morning) and wouldn't give us any, and the storeman's action station was miles away. Nick Allin sorted it out for us, 'acquiring' three lifejackets, and we strapped into the seats and took off.

Then things went from bad to very near disaster. Dennis had, accidentally in the rush, firmly strapped his safety harness around the cyclic control (it was a dual-control aircraft so he had all the controls duplicated in front and either side of him). Peter had to land again very hurriedly as he discovered he couldn't move the controls.

As this delay took up several minutes, the ship had turned on to a different heading out of wind, but Flyco sent us off in the original direction – directly into a mountain covered with radio aerials. We only just realised this in time as it was beginning to get light. Then only one radio worked and Dennis had forgotten his torch so couldn't see the maps! This was developing into a comedy of errors.

Because of an electrical fault Peter Cameron had to repeat everything that I said on his pilots' headset, as well as fly. Things went as well as you could have expected under these circumstances. Dennis, on his radio set, was for some strange RAF sort of reason called 'Hairy Mary' and his base station on the ship was 'Thunderbox'. At one stage the ship's transmissions became very faint so Peter Cameron (a very experienced and totally unflappable Royal Marines officer) told the operator to get his head out of the box. Peter then suffered a fit of hysterical laughter, and in a scene of general chaos the helicopter went into a dive until he recovered. The radio operator on the ship, having retuned his set to get better communications, came back to us using a very high-pitched voice, saying he was sorry he couldn't do any better

because his head was stuck.

There is a very sophisticated Russian AGI trawler, bristling with radio antennae, spying on us and monitoring our frequencies. I wonder what Ivan made of all that?"

The last of the Commanders Major Jonathan Thomson, the Officer Commanding the Special Boat Squadron, had now come aboard and was sharing the bridge-wing Portacabin with SAS Commanding Officer Lt Colonel Mike Rose. Whilst waiting in the heat of Ascension for *Fearless* to arrive, Jonathan had acquired a tan and become bored. He'd cut-down his lightweight camouflage trousers into shorts, and instead of desert 'wellies' wore open-toed sandals, and was rather envied by the rest of us.

Jonathan was quiet and apparently grave, and a careful listener. A stranger might accuse him of a lack of sense of humour – probably because they had without realising it, become the object of the gentle sarcasm with which Jonathan prods people. He'd been a member of the British National Orienteering team and although now out of serious training, was very capable of taking good runners to the cleaners in rough woodland, as he had done to me on several occasions. FO1 was soon to be under his command.

On 7 May, FO1 along with Dennis Marshall-Hasdell with his Tactical Forward Air Control party, transferred from *Fearless* to her sister ship HMS *Intrepid*, like HMS *Hermes* rescued from the scrap yard. Most of the key war ships had either been sold to someone else or promised to the breakers, yet here they all were at sea in another hemisphere, to sort out a group of Argentine scrap metal merchants.

Being much less crowded, *Intrepid* was altogether better than *Fearless*. Dennis and I shared a cabin just along from the wardroom and were able to enjoy food and drink unheard of (or run out of) in *Fearless*. *Intrepid* was old, and had been out of service for a radical refurbishment. But in just ten days she'd been refitted and put to sea – a process that normally takes a year or more.

*Intrepid's* layout was ostensibly the same as *Fearless,* but with a few very confusing differences. Bare wires hung down from light fittings not yet connected in the rush to put to sea. All her crew were drafted to other ships or shore-based jobs, and so to get the ship seaworthy in such record time the Navy had simply asked them to return. The wardroom CPO had actually left the navy after completing his 22 years, but had rejoined and was marvellous at keeping the wardroom 'homely' in spite of the nightmare that was soon to begin.

On our third night on board, a signal ordered that *Intrepid* be converted as an emergency operating theatre and field hospital. While

we watched a strange film *The Omega Man,* about the one surviving human after an atomic war who is not tainted with the terrible mutating disease, *Intrepid's* engineers started the conversion in the Midshipmans' Gunroom Mess next door.

When the Navy is at war, things happen very quickly. First they wheeled in oxy-acetylene cylinders to slice twenty square feet from the steel bulkhead for a door wide enough for stretchers. We could barely see the screen for smoke and fumes. Next they removed the sink from under our bar counter, and re-plumbed it next door. By the time the film was over, the room was ready for the installation of specialised bits of medical kit to complete the transformation. The oxygen cylinders and cases of instruments had been stored in the bowels of the ship as part of its basic equipment, waiting for this very day, along with the instructions followed by the ship's engineers.

But the next morning, some terribly senior naval medical officers in crisp tropical whites with gold braid, arrived to survey the wreckage of our wardroom.

"It's simply too small," they observed loudly in fruity voices, their skinny legs looking ridiculously anaemic.

"The access is too restricted, and clearly", they added, "It would be absolutely *impossible to* use *Intrepid* as a hospital ship."

We finally sailed from Ascension Island to join the rest of the Task Force, who were waiting just north east of the Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ). Even now, we still thought in terms not of landing or fighting, but bobbing about waiting in the South Atlantic. I was concerned with the threat of the Argentine Air Force and the effect of bombs hitting one of our troop-carrying liners, or how a landing would fare if the enemy jets were able to bomb our troops on the ground. But at least now we'd left Ascension, and were on our way south.

The geo-political aspect of the situation was disturbing when seen from our worm's eye level. There was the possibility of escalation to involve other Organisation of American States (OAS) countries and Cuba, and possibly the use against us of Cuban troops operating as a Soviet proxy force. I saw the bombing of mainland Argentine airfields as a sensible military pre-condition to our landing, but I did not think that we could actually do this for political reasons.

And so it seemed we were on our own.

The next nine days were full of uncertainty as we ploughed south through seas that got steadily colder and rougher. The various assault drills were practised daily, carefully revised and refined to cut down the times taken still further. There were no problems over the realism of these exercises. My diary continued:

*Sunday 9 May*: The usual 0700 shake followed by a shower and breakfast. The Beeb is being sporadically jammed by Spanish voices and music so I've not heard the complete news today. An Observer reporter was commenting on the situation and said confidently that we were destined to fight. Cheers, pal.

We had a church service and hymn singing in the senior rates (Senior NCO's) dining room in the memory of the 20 officers and men killed aboard the HMS *Sheffield* and the three Harrier pilots who have died. I had to go for a quiet walk on the flight deck afterwards. Several others did too. We carry our respirators, anti-flash gloves and hood, lifejackets and bright orange 'once only suits' (immersion suits) with us everywhere we go.

*Tuesday 11 May:* another day much as yesterday. The excitement started after lunch with two Russian BEAR high level reconnaissance aircraft flying low and slow over the fleet giving it a very thorough going over. As they took our photos, we took theirs and eventually they flew off.

Then, as I was waiting for a helicopter to take me to *Fearless* for a conference, the alarms went off and we all ran to action stations pulling on anti-flash. A periscope had been seen off our port bow so we went through the routine of securing for action, lashing the wardroom furniture to walls and supporting pillars, putting the freshly-laid afternoon tea back in the galley, then waiting. I fell asleep on the wardroom carpet. The fleet turned away from the position of the sighting, the ASD (anti-submarine duties) helicopters were launched and the frigates *Ardent* and *Argonaut* were sent to investigate. There seemed to be two submarines, both of them Russian, and a school of whales behind which the boats were hiding. This was the High Seas, so all three parties had a perfect right to be there, but it did seem an affront to the whales.

We've just heard the Harriers from *Atlantic Conveyer* were scrambled to intercept and shoot down the Argie Boeing surveillance plane (as Maggie threatened if it comes snooping any more). However this radar contact turned out to be an RAF Victor tanker aircraft waiting to refuel the SHAR (Sea Harrier) when doing CAP (Combat Air Patrol). These pilots must be doing many, many hours in the air, flying out to us all the way from Ascension.

*Wednesday, 12 May:* I've been across to *Fearless* to get briefed. We are to land (in the Falklands) sometime

soonish – after 18 May – and in a change of plan, I'm to start off with 45 Commando, landing by LCU (Landing Craft Utility) with the CO in the assault landing, and after that in a forward OP (Observation Post) to the south of the landing area (San Carlos) overlooking Darwin.

Had a letter from my friend Alice in New York. Some of her friends are Argentinian and are embarrassed by all this, blaming Galtieri.

We received, by signal, orders to join 45 Commando for the landing.

*Saturday, 15 May:* I've got to go across to RFA *Stromness* (the ship carrying the bulk of 45 Commando) for orders with CO 45 Commando. There has also been a problem with the wrong secret codes being issued, so I've got to sort that out.

We completed a course of medical refresher training and were issued with the morphine – two ampoules of Omnopon each, packed in urine sample tubes to prevent them getting damaged. We also finished making up a comprehensive medical pack for the patrol to carry in addition to our normal individual first-aid kits. These were complemented with as many vacuum-packed field dressings as we could fit into our fighting order and pockets.

The morphine and our compasses, the two most important bits of kit we had, went round our necks. The rest of our kit was carried in the following way. Personal weapons were always in our hands, fully loaded. In our pockets we carried 24-hours worth of food (mainly chocolate and biscuits), several more loaded magazines and first-aid gear, penknife, water purifying tablets and a set of maps – all completely unmarked, the positions having been memorised. Our fighting order – pouches suspended on a belt with shoulder straps, contained more loaded magazines, food, medical gear, a small cooker, chopping knife, emergency flares, a radio beacon, at least two quart water bottles, a tin mug for cooking, and grenades. The Bergen rucksack contained a resupply of food, ammunition, a camouflage net with waterproof poncho shelter, a radio, spare batteries and a hand generator, quilted 'Chairman Mao' suit, spare socks, foot powder, a telescope, binoculars, a night vision device, a camera with spare film, and other items I've now forgotten about. We always used to take tins of curry powder on exercise to brighten up the compo rations, but now no-one seemed to bother with this small extra weight, preferring to carry more ammunition.

This list is by no means exhaustive but it does give some idea of how our bergens and fighting order came to weigh an average of 120 pounds and often much more. The clothes we wore, with the pockets

filled with food, ammunition and medical kit, weighed about 20 or 30 pounds, plus the pistol on a belt around the waist or in an inner pocket, and binoculars tucked down the front of the windproof smock. Naturally, as you ate the food, the load became lighter, and it was very noticeable that for the same sort of reason, mortar teams were always very keen to start firing off their very heavy rounds.

Because of the weight, you could only really carry ten days supply of very meagre rations with you. This would mean one tin and a couple of packets of biscuits a day, and a lot of very sweet 'wets' of tea and coffee. I'd taken up smoking small cigars, which were lighter than food and good at staving off the hunger. It meant that towards the end of longer operations, even with extra rations brought in and buried in caches, we'd end up stripping out our bergens, pockets and fighting order, to find that last bit of chocolate or packet of squashed, frozen then melted Rolo chocolate toffees.

Our physical training on the way down had continued relentlessly despite the changes of ship and the conflicting demands on space. Running round a small flight-deck on one of the RFAs during heavy weather was quite exciting, the secret being to time your run so that as you got near the side, the ship was on an up-roll and the first half of your run back was downhill, changing into uphill as you reached the rail again. If you got this wrong you could easily end up in the sea.

I made much use of my skipping-rope becoming adept at crossovers and double-jumps. FO1's daily regime was a warm-up in the morning, wearing boots to keep our feet from going soft, and then a hard session in the late afternoon light, wearing trainers. This consisted of a series of warm-up exercises followed by a complete sequence of strength and mobility exercises to cover every muscle group, especially our backs which were going to have to carry the heavy loads. These were accompanied by and followed by cardio exercises.

After these exertions we'd go down to the vending machine flat and have a cup of tea, or, if the ship's ice-cream machine was working, a cornet from the kiosk. I'd then go to the wardroom for tea and stickies as adjunct to dinner in the Wardroom, two hours later than in the main galley.

Events seemed to speed up as we prepared for the landing at San Carlos Water. D-Day was firmly established as 21 May, which became an open secret throughout the ship. I began to spend much of my time in the Amphibious Operations Room reading the bulging signal logs to make sense of the various agencies that were sending me conflicting orders. Everyone was going flat out on their little section of the jigsaw puzzle, and you had to work everything out for yourself.

A multitude of last-minute preparations kept us busy. We totally

stripped down our rifles and pistols, checked and oiled the working parts, dismantling the magazines to ensure that they were completely free of dirt and that the springs which pushed the rounds up to the chambers were not weakened. Our maps were glued together and cut so they could be folded into a trouser pocket, applying waterproof plastic film to the surface to seal out water.

In the quiet of the ship's chapel, the only space not already used by others, I went carefully through the various Geneva Conventions and Rules of War with FO1. It sounds strange to have 'rules of war' – indeed almost a contradiction of terms. War is a terrible thing, but without the moral constraint of the Geneva Conventions it could very easily become much worse. I was particularly concerned with the rights of prisoners of war. It is essential, if captured, to know exactly your rights within the Geneva Conventions if only to identify whether or not your captors are playing by those rules.

You are only obliged to give name, rank, number and date of birth – referred to as the 'Big Four'. It was also important to be quite sure of the rules that determine who on the battlefield is a combatant, and to whom the status of prisoner of war is given under the Conventions. Anyone who openly carries arms, regardless of whether uniform is worn, is legally a combatant and therefore may not be shot as a spy. The threat of summary execution would make it very hard to resist interrogation if you were not absolutely sure of the law – a small comfort under the circumstances, but preferable to ignorance. This clause was particularly important to Special Forces people, as we wore what suited us best, rather than what was officially provided.

My nightly study of the thick, classified signals log started to pay off. Knowing the background to the decisions that were being made, when eventually a series of signals came in giving me my instructions, I knew more or less what was going on. Our orders to go ashore with 45 Commando had been a red herring – as I'd suspected. We were now told that FO1 was to work exclusively with the Special Boat Squadron, in keeping with all the training that Nick Allin and I had been doing with them for the previous four years, running the Battery's two amphibious operations teams. Des Nixon, Steve Hoyland and Tim Bedford, our new boys, did not know the SBS, and were understandably uncertain whether this good or not. Nick and I had no such reservations, and were delighted to be working with our friends again.

The Special Boat Squadron has been described as the Royal Marine equivalent of the SAS. This is an unfair (although understandable) comparison, because the two organisations are very different. Members of the SAS are recruited from the Army and its structure is based upon an infantry regiment plus their own signals

squadron, training wings with others (like a helicopter flight) tacked on. They have the whole British Army from which to select the people they want. As Army units are very different (what do the Ghurkhas, Grenadier Guards and Royal Engineers have in common – for example) the SAS have a very wide range of experience, background and type of person from which to draw. Conversely, the SBS recruit only from the Royal Marines, a much smaller number from which to select, but all from the same, already highly-trained background. This is hardly a disadvantage – indeed it is one of the strengths of the SBS that they are all Royal Marines who've survived an extremely taxing period of further selection and training.

The SBS in 1982 was one squadron strong[3] and so was known as 'the Squadron.' (The SAS were considerably larger.) Their role demands that they operate in four-man teams and rarely in larger groups. The SAS operate in anything from four-man teams, up to squadron strength.

The SBS' speciality is the sea and its immediate hinterland, and they are the experts in covert and clandestine amphibious operations, having pioneered this field since the days of the 'Cockleshell Heroes' of the last war. Their motto, 'Strength through Guile' describes their unique approach, which is based upon what a four-man team can do with explosives, automatic weapons and brainpower. To this, we added our tactical knowledge, experience and technical expertise, plus the 4.5-inch guns of the Royal Navy, the 105-mm Light Guns of the Royal Artillery and the various munitions of the Harrier ground attack aircraft. We also brought a war-fighting perspective that despite all our training together SBS didn't yet quite understand. But very soon they would…

My Orders said to prepare for special operations lasting three days, taking all our radios and 'light scales' (i.e. no sleeping-bags or shelters but as much ammunition as we could carry without becoming too ponderous to fight). This meant that we would not be doing our normal covert-surveillance job, but probably taking part of a raid.

But first, 148 Battery needed to have a last get-together on *Fearless*. This was most likely to be the last time we'd come together again until it was all over. We needed to talk through our procedures, and decide exactly how we would operate for the rest of the campaign.

Since we'd last been all together in Poole six weeks earlier, the world had changed radically. We'd been at sea. For others the strange period of preparation and waiting in Poole had been extended, punctuated as in our experience, by a continuation of hilarious 'last' nights in pubs and wine bars. They'd then flown by VC10 flight to

Ascension, then embarkated into various ships.

Two 148 Battery teams, led by captains Willie McCracken and Chris Brown, had played a key part in the recapture of South Georgia. They'd directed the naval gunfire with great accuracy to frighten but not kill the Argentine garrison, causing them to surrender.

After South Georgia, these teams had been joined by two more teams. They'd already begun a programme of naval bombardment of Port Stanley using gunships from Admiral Woodward's carrier force. This went under the overall code name of 'Operation Paraquet'. And now, despite our early start, we were the last to arrive in the area of actual operations.

The gunnery dimension to this was organized by Lieutenant-Colonel Keith Eve, the Royal Artillery Liaison Officer Naval Gunfire Support (RALONGS). From his constant moving about the fleet from gunship to gunship, and with the Admirals' staff on *Hermes,* Keith Eve had become quite well-known.

Some of the naval officers I spoke with seemed to think he was rather mad, maybe due to his enthusiasm for the task. But the more likely explanation was that they hadn't yet understood the huge amounts of ammunition they'd be firing – far more than they were used to from peacetime exercising. The Port Stanley bombardments were taking place in daylight and the ships going in to Port Stanley had been attacked. This for them was highly unusual. The presence of Keith on board – and 148 Battery generally, put them at a much higher level of action and risk, so their initial uncertainty over our highly experienced, cordite-tinged colonel was understandable.

Nick Allin and I were summoned to *Fearless* on 18 May for Orders and a detailed communications brief. All the FO teams were to be there, so I decided to take Des, Tim and Steve in the helicopter as well, so they could catch up on the adventures of their mates.

We were delighted to see the others again, news eagerly exchanged. Colonel Keith Eve told of his lucky escape in an attack by Mirage jets when two bombs went through the side of the ship – the first of several incorrectly fused bombs that failed to explode. He'd even managed to take photos, demonstrating either a lack of imagination, or a lot of nerve.

Captain Bob Harmes also re-appeared, larger than life and very noisy. From the frustration he'd suffered through inactivity on *Canberra*, Bob had started an additional and involuntary career as a naval fire fighter, in the first of several ships that he was to be on when they were bombed.

Bob's job was as one our invaluable liaison officers, in the ops rooms of gunships while we were ashore firing them. He had yet to have the first of his three shipwrecks, which led to his becoming the

official ‘Jonah of the Fleet’, feared by captains and ship’s companies alike.

The other four NGFO’s, Captains Kevin Arnold, Chris Brown, Nigel Bedford and Willie McCracken, were shuttling from ship to ship keeping the bombardment of Port Stanley going. Whereas the RAF’s Black Buck Vulcan bomber raids had put just two iron bombs onto the Stanley runway, our NGS (Naval Gunfire Support) was doing serious damage, as the next step up in the ladder in our escalation of military response.

Willie’s team however were missing from this gathering. They’d already landed in the Falklands, near to the proposed landing area, having motored ashore a few nights earlier as part of the Special Forces surveillance programme.

For the daylight bombardments of Port Stanley, the gunships were leaving the main *Hermes* carrier group and steaming south to a gunline that was only a few miles east of the airfield. Eventually, the threat of land-based Exocet missiles made daylight bombardments too risky. But until then, the ship’s helicopters were being launched with an NGFO strapped into the co-pilot’s seat. He would order the targets and adjust them, bobbing up, often from the cover of hills when the shells were due to land, watching for the smoke of detonation then making adjustments.

The first time they did this, Chris Brown was the NGFO in a Lynx helicopter from HMS *Alacrity* (a Type 21 gunship). He’d persuaded the pilots, Bob Burrows and Rob Sleeman, to remove their anti-ship missiles and mount two GPMGs (General Purpose Machine Guns) in the rear, one pointing out of each side door. Chris manned one and the ‘Schoolie’ (*Alacrity’s* Royal Naval school teacher), who’d been for a time in 41 Commando, manned the other. This ‘terrifying’ duo were to terrify themselves!

They took off from HMS *Alacrity*, south of Port Stanley and flew in a wide loop north, well clear of Cape Pembroke and the airfield. Once over Berkeley Sound they came in over Kidney Island in order to land on high ground east of Mount Low, where Chris intended to shell Stanley using *Alacrity*’s gun. But spotting a fishing boat with soldiers on board flying a blue-and-white flag, they swooped down on it with both machine-guns blazing.

The anti-ship missiles Chris had rejected would have been ideal for this target. After one pass they circled round behind Kidney Island. But rather foolishly they made a second run, at the same time as a fast patrol boat emerged into the bay with its cannons firing.

Some eight bullets hit the helicopter, but no one was hurt and nothing apparently damaged. The pilots were unaware they’d been hit at all, and did not see the shattered hole in the windscreen a few

inches to the right of the first pilot's head. In the back Chris shouted to the Schoolie that on no account was this bad news to be shared.

They landed on a spur east of Mount Low, and fulfilling his self-admitted desire to be the first member of the Task Force to set foot on the Falklands Chris leapt out, only to discover fuel leaking from a bullet hole in their helicopters' tank. They took off immediately, radio'ing they'd been hit.

Captain Willie McCracken, on standby strapped into the second helicopter, was ordered to take off and intercept them in case they ditched in the sea. With dwindling fuel, Brown and co flew directly to safety – which took them over the top of the FPB (Fast Patrol Boat) which fired at them again.

They landed back on *Alacrity* with a bone-dry fuel tank. Only then were the bullet holes pointed out to the pilots, who were less-than-impressed.

Willie McCracken, in the second helicopter was listening to the radio transmissions while making notes for his own sortie. Much later he told me that as this drama unfolded, his pilot's face, and he presumed his own, grew whiter and whiter.

It was also Chris Brown who, four days earlier, had been widely reported in newspaper accounts of the SAS' Pebble Island raid, as the "cool, calm voice" directing naval gunfire onto the airfield during the SAS attack. His team gleefully reported to us that on this occasion he'd been everything but "cool and calm".

The Orders Group and 'Comms' brief were held in *Fearless'* make-shift chapel, a Portacabin lashed down onto the upper Sea Cat deck, the ship's only spare room. Overwhelming pressure on space had relegated the proper chapel to become the Commodore Amphibious Warfare (COMMAW) staff office – of Michael Clapp, our 'other boss' after Julian Thompson. The 148 Battery code sheets and communications details (frequencies, schedules, etc.) were handed round like hymnbooks, but the grim note taking during the sermon ended any similarity to the Portacabin's designated use.

At that meeting, we learned more about what Willie McCracken's team were doing. With Bombardier Jackson and crew, Willie had landed, a week ahead of the main landing, in the area of Sussex Mountains, to the south of San Carlos Water.

They'd been dropped off by rubber boat from a mother ship that had steamed south into Falkland Sound. On landing, they'd buried a cache of spare food and ammunition, and were now making their way very carefully and slowly by night to an OP position to await the rest of us. Their task was to send back information if it was important enough (specifically if the area was suddenly reinforced), and then when the landings actually took place, to fire gunships at enemy

targets. Once the troops were ashore they were to link up with the Paras, who were to create a defensive position to the south of the beach-head.

Afterwards Willie told us of the very nasty shock they'd experienced soon after being dropped off south-west of San Carlos. They'd carried the heavy cache away from the landing point, dug a hole and buried it using very careful camouflage. This activity would have been the most worrying part of their insertion, as had their landing been observed, they'd be easy to attack. They left the area as quickly as they could move.

Once well clear of the landing area and cache, they slowed down to start the very careful business of surveying the ground ahead with night-scopes, checking behind that they weren't being followed, then moving deliberately forward. Jacko, Willie's team second-in-command, was 'tail-end Charlie'. In checking behind, he got the uneasy feeling they were being followed. They stopped and went into 'all-round defence', lying on the ground in a circle facing outwards, weapons at the ready.

To their horror, a figure appeared moving up over the ridge behind, coming towards them. Then several others appeared carefully spaced apart, in single file, moving cautiously, stopping and peering forward, then moving on with balanced steps. This was the nightmare that the team had hoped would never happen. They'd been detected. They made their 66-mm anti-tank rockets ready, laid out grenades to hand and prayed this patrol would not find them.

More figures came up over the dark ridge, and as they drew closer seemed to be talking, and it wasn't English. This patrol grew from being a section to a platoon of thirty or so, then an even larger group as more of the figures shuffled carefully up out of the gully. The talking became louder and the cautious peculiarity of their gait more pronounced as they got closer, until it was clear they were penguins.

The relief and release of tension gave way to amusement, but this was short-lived. A very large number of these birds had sensed the presence of the team and were investigating. When they got close enough to determine they were human, the birds erupted into a sudden panic, rushing off screaming with indignation. The patrol carried on, fervently hoping that there were no Argentinians in the area to notice the disturbance and investigate.

Already I was thinking ahead – not just about our first operation to come, but what we would do after that, and how to minimise confusion.

I decided not to take the whole team across to *Antrim* for the three-day SBS op', but leave Des on *Intrepid*. Experience told me that a

sensible person who knows exactly what you are doing is invaluable for looking after the kit you've left behind, getting anything to you that might subsequently be required, then making preparations for when you return. Des was seriously unimpressed with my choice, but understood the logic and did a good job. I promised him 'pole position' on the next operation.

It's extraordinary how dreadful it feels to be left behind, especially when the others are doing something dangerous. The strong desire to be there with the team is opposed by the natural sense of self-preservation that insists you are better off in a warm, safe ship. Unfortunately, any balance is upset by a strong feeling of guilt at being safe when the others are not. (The equation was to become even more complicated when it became clear that remaining aboard ships in San Carlos Water was not necessarily the safe option.)

Once Orders were given, questions answered and farewells completed, 148 Battery dispersed, FO1 to *Intrepid* to get our gear ready to move to HMS *Antrim* and join the SBS. After all the confusion and uncertainty, it was a relief to know what we were doing.

My worries and misgivings, for instance over the effect of Argentine air strikes, were put aside and I concentrated on the things that I could actually do something about. From now on, I had no time for anything outside my own little bubble of activity. In fact, I remember feeling glad that it was someone else's responsibility to worry about the Argentine Air Force – illogically, as we were as likely to suffer their attentions as anyone else.

The next day, 19 May, was spent in that most typical of activities – waiting for a helicopter. We eventually flew to *Antrim* with our equipment via several other ships in the now-familiar nautical version of musical chairs. Lunchtime saw us temporarily stranded in an intermediate ship, so we had a meal and arrived finally on *Antrim* as night was falling.

As we'd left *Fearless*, the SAS had been flying in from an RFA, ready for a diversionary raid on Darwin and Goose Green at the time of the main landings at San Carlos. On reaching *Antrim*, we learned that one of *Intrepid's* Sea King helicopters had crashed into the sea whilst shifting men and equipment ready for the assault. A search for survivors was being made. Rumour suggested this Sea King was carrying SAS.

I later learned this was true. The aircraft was carrying people I knew from D Squadron (SAS), and an RAF forward air controller Garth Hawkins who I knew from the very sociable and civilised forward air control exercises he'd organised in fields near to the best pubs in mid Wales. The pilot also turned out to be a friend, who escaped with only cuts and shock – all these details gradually

emerging much later.

One of the SAS troopers who survived later told me that, as the helicopter was under water and going down, there was terrible panic as people fought to escape. He'd managed to get out, except that his boot became caught in criss-cross webbing at the back of a seat. He said he felt a hand grab his ankle and then a sawing movement. The hand tapped his ankle firmly twice – like a judo wrestler when he submits to an arm lock. He'd been cut free. He swam to the surface and was rescued, his benefactor one of the trapped eighteen who drowned.

I felt such a disaster was inevitable. There'd been so much flying, statistically something was bound to go wrong. I felt worse about this than the sinking of *Sheffield*, and from this point onwards was always nervous when in helicopters.

*Antrim* was a destroyer equipped with the Mark 6 gun system, and several varieties of missile. Being an older ship, her corridors were spacious with comfortable cabins and mess-decks. The crew clearly enjoyed having Special Forces on board, and were very confident after their success at Grytviken helping to capture the submarine *Santa Fe,* and coordinating the recapture of South Georgia. The food was also excellent!

All SB Squadron were based on board *Antrim*, having finished the first stage of their war – the thorough recce of all the Argie positions. They still had teams out, including one to the north of Willie McCracken's location in the south of the San Carlos landing area. They'd had some narrow escapes, including a team getting separated, then losing one man for over a week. (They'd withdrawn the remainder of the patrol, then having got more rations and ammo, returned, found the missing member who'd followed procedures and was waiting at one of the pre-designated rendezvous points – an emergency RV).

Constant living in soaking-wet holes in the moss, wading rivers and eating snack food on these long recce patrols was already sapping their strength, and most were suffering the early symptoms of trench foot. As special forces units are able to order the equipment they need as opposed to having to make do with what they might be given, SB Squadron had ordered seemingly magical, waterproof, Swedish ski-march boots to replace the virtually useless Army issue boots – but they'd not yet arrived. Although our friends were visibly tired, they were quietly positive, now thinking well ahead beyond the complications and dangers of the landings with which everybody else was preoccupied.

We were part of what military planners call 'Advance Force

Operations' – the shadowy world of concealed work that precedes all military operations. Their recce work for the main landings largely complete, the SBS had moved on to planning what they were going to do next, predicting what the main force might have to do once on land, and the reconnaissance missions necessary before those operations could be planned.

# Chapter 6. Fanning Head

FO1 had been warned by signal from HMS *Fearless* to pack for a three-day operation, carrying all our radios but only light equipment scales. Once on *Antrim* we were told exactly what we were to do. A fighting patrol, to be landed the day before the first troops ashore, was being mounted with naval gunfire from *Antrim* as the key element in the plan. The purpose of this patrol was to ensure that the strait between which the warships would have to pass in order to enter San Carlos Water was safe.

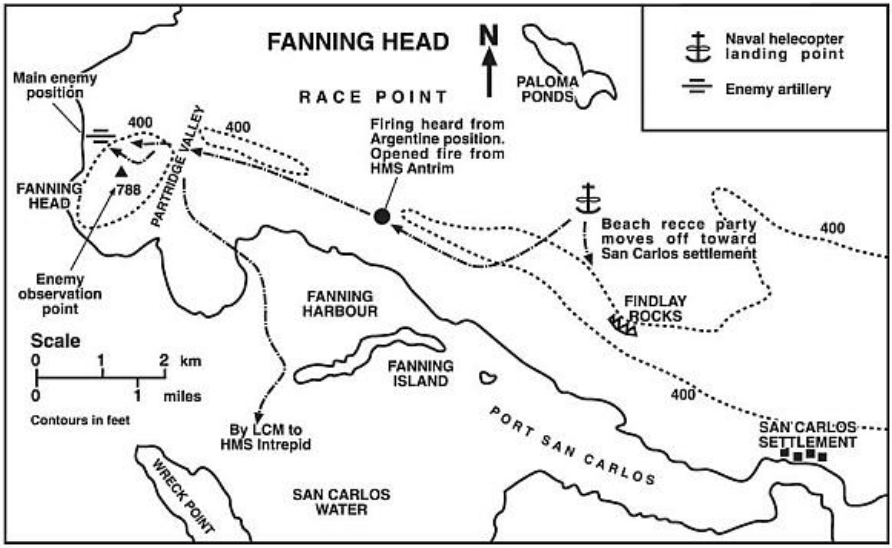
The feature that commands the narrow entrance to San Carlos Water is called Fanning Head, a steep hill offering excellent views all round. SF patrols had reported considerable enemy helicopter activity and troop movement in the area. SIGINT, the top secret signals interception people, reported that a 'heavy weapons company' had been moved into the area, although they could not say whether this was located at Fanning Head or somewhere else around San Carlos Water. This lack of detail was because of initial uncertainty about the way the Argies transmitted map references – which was to be resolved immediately once we captured some Argie maps.

Our mission was to 'neutralise the Argentine heavy weapons company', which we were to achieve by bluffing them into surrendering to a numerically inferior force equipped only with small arms, but with a gunship in support. We aimed to look like an infantry battalion (which has some 650 men) by carrying a vast and disproportionate amount of firepower.

This rather strange mission was ordered, as is usual with Special Forces operations, from the highest level, where war planners needed to assess the resolve of our enemy. They'd already seen the Argentine garrison at Grytviken surrender without a fight after being shelled, and wanted to see if the Falkland Island troops would do the same.

This was to be a psychological operation, further complicated by having two aims: the assessment of Argentine resolve, plus ensuring the safe passage of the fleet through the 'neutralisation' of the enemy unit. It was left to me to decide how the 'neutralisation' was to be achieved, and indeed if it actually had been achieved. This was a far cry from standard military planning, where each mission has to have one clear aim with a few simple caveats. These were almost open-ended instructions.

***Fanning Head Map***




There was also a strong humanitarian aspect to the mission we'd been given. I was urged to keep the naval gunfire falling beyond the enemy gun position, and move it slowly towards us to 'herd' them away from their guns. Once they were no longer able to fire at the fleet at sea, we were to attempt to take them prisoner. A Spanish linguist was coming with us, complete with a portable loudspeaker system, to get within loudspeaker range and call on them to give up. I was then to creep the shells up to them, and if in the end they still refused to surrender, I was actually to hit them.

The linguist was an RM officer, Captain Rod Bell, who'd been brought up in South America (I think Costa Rica). His Spanish was good enough to pass as a Cuban or Argentinean. He was not however in the Task Force as an interpreter, but as Adjutant of the Logistic Regiment, itself a very demanding, responsible and important job. It had taken Rod some time to encourage the system to 'discover' his abilities as a linguist, and he'd only recently been relieved of his many adjutantal duties.

With Rod's extensive South American experience, he believed the Argentinians were alarmed by what they saw as a huge British over-reaction to their invasion, to which they thought Britain had acquiesced by default. (At Poole, before the Argie invasion, we'd regarded the proposed scrapping of *Endurance* as an encouragement to Argentine claims in the area). Rod, with strong emotional ties to South America and his knowledge of its people, had sympathy for the Argentine position and particularly for the plight of their individual soldiers.

All the Special Forces planning on *Antrim* was being done from the Admiral's day cabin in the bow of the ship. This was a usually-splendid sitting room occupied by the Admiral when *Antrim* was used

as flagship, for receptions, meetings and parties. Thick carpets were covered with military gear, and the magnificent oak table was protected by blankets, bearing maps, half-filled armalite magazines, notebooks and pencils, sellotape, scissors, bits of black masking tape (known as 'harry maskers'), and map sheets embellished with chinagraph squares, triangles and arrows. Around the walls were piled bergen rucksacks, painted with black, green and brown paint, many open with their contents spread out over the surrounding area of deep pile Wilton. There were 9-mm pistols, several sorts of armalite rifle, rocket and grenade launchers, camouflage nets, shaggy camouflage 'gilly' suits, tent-poles, bags of tinned food, bars of half eaten chocolate lying on the table and chairs (everyone eating while they still could), boots, plimsolls, socks and waterproof suits – in fact, such confusion that one wondered if anyone would ever sort out who owned what.

But this confusion is all part of the process of really thorough preparation – each person knowing exactly what is his and where he carries it in his equipment. The piles of kit were in groups, the four-man patrol groups, and within those patrols each person knowing exactly where the other kept everything, being just as at home in each other's webbing, pockets and bergens as their own. This intimacy is especially important when someone gets wounded or when vital things like food and ammo run short. Also, it's not possible for each man to hump just his own kit and nothing else. There are always many other bits of equipment to be carried, shared out amongst the patrol to even out the weight of the loads.

The SBS patrol commander, a small, fair-haired Royal Marine lieutenant Roger F., was busy writing his orders, which he would give at noon the next day. He was not so much planning as coordinating the various arrangements. There was much advice on offer from the very experienced senior NCOs in the section, almost too much in fact. The SBS patrols were not used to working as a larger unit, normally being on their own. Their strength was individuality, which was hard to suppress in order to mount this large and unusual combined patrol.

The operation was quite complicated, especially the helicopter insertion phase. A Sea King would have to be used in conjunction with a borrowed Wessex from *Fearless*. As *Antrim's* flight-deck could only manage one helicopter at a time, the spare would have to take off and hover, then land back on again once the other aircraft had taken off. These complications would take place at night, and in what looked certain to be rough weather.

Our biggest complication was lack of information about the enemy. We had a choice of three fairly widely separated locations that our intelligence said they might be occupying. They could also be at

several other places, and not necessarily all together, or in the numbers expected. Several secure-speech telephone calls to Jonno Thompson the SBS OC in *Fearless* failed to get any clarification, so we were left with an imprecise aim for the operation.

In my opinion, Fanning Head was the most important geographical feature – and so was the ground of tactical importance that we had to dominate. Failing everything else, we had to deny it to the enemy, in order to ensure the ships' safe passage into San Carlos Water. We'd deal with any other enemy that materialised elsewhere on an *ad hoc* basis.

We were not going to have enough time to carry out a full recce of the area. The dictates of security meant we could only go ashore after dark the day before the landings, which gave us only the one night to locate the enemy then 'neutralise' them. If the planners had assessed enemy morale correctly, it was thought our Spanish speaker would persuade them to surrender. The fleet would then enter the anchorage, 3 Commando Brigade would land and we would recover by landing-craft to *Intrepid*. Thus went the plan.

The spare helo, a Wessex, was in the process of having a very new bit of equipment fitted, a prototype thermal image camera to enable us to locate the heavy-weapons company, hooked up to a video recorder and TV screen. Our parachute instructor from Poole RAF Flight Sergeant Doug Fletcher, had been instructed in its use – partly from the manufacturer's handbook, but also by a REME sergeant major from the Farnborough Research Establishment, who accompanied this equipment.

The camera was suspended in the doorway of the Wessex using parachute strops, away from the heat of the exhaust. The thermal imager (TI) produced a heat picture in which living things were said to show up very clearly, which could be recorded and played back on the TV screen.

The plan was to fly slowly over the whole area, 'vacuuming' with the 'TI' to record a video. We'd then fly back and land onto *Antrim*, play back the tape, from which we'd determine the enemy location – or locations. I fervently hoped that they would prove to be in the Fanning Head area and that there would only be one group of them. Our patrol would already be briefed in every way except for the enemy location details. After a few minutes to decide on a helo landing-site, the RVs and the objective, we'd quickly brief everybody, then the first lift would clamber aboard the Sea King and fly off to secure and prepare the LS for the rest of us.

Facing the possibility of being wounded, before the ship closed up at Action Stations and the sickbay stopped seeing ordinary patients, I decided to have a tetanus booster injection, just in case. At Action

Stations, the medics moved to the wardroom, the traditional location of the medical centre of an RN ship in action, leaving the sickbay as an otherwise unused deck space, which rapidly becomes littered with stretchers, medical equipment boxes and oxygen cylinders.

Once we left the rest of the fleet and sailed for East Falkland, a tetanus jab would not be possible. This was like a good luck charm that I hoped would not turn out to be a temptation of fate.

Throughout the day of 20 May, tension mounted. We moved our kit from the admiral's day cabin to the main galley, which was more accessible to the flight-deck. The day was spent eating and packing kit, accompanied by more or less continual planning conferences in the admiral's cabin.

The formal Orders Group that afternoon was a tense affair, with wrinkles in the plan being ironed out as we went. Everyone had a sleep in the afternoon and woke for a huge supper and a last meeting. The captain of *Antrim* came to this, as in theory he was in charge of the operation and wanted to give the plan his approval. We were not terribly enthusiastic at having to have to present the plan to him at this late stage.

We then went down to the main galley to load ammunition. Small-arms magazines are always stored empty to stop the springs weakening. Mortar bombs and 66-mm rockets had to be unpacked from the ship's magazine. Our personal weapons were cleaned, pulled through to remove oil from the barrel that would make smoke when the weapon was fired, then lightly oiled. Hand-grenades were cleaned then primed, sliding in the detonators that would set them off, tensioning the striker spring, inserting the split pins, before carefully storing these lethal objects into our pouches. Everyone settled down to sleep if they could manage it, and rest if they could not. Special Forces operations are characterised by many hours of tense waiting.

Outside in the howling, heaving darkness, *Antrim* was steaming very fast away from the Task Force to the point at which she would launch the Wessex for our recce flight. This point would be over 100 miles distance from East Falkland, so not only would our insertion take some time, but any problems would occur a very long way from any help.

It was a totally dark night, with no moon, and sparse cloud cover. It took some time for the eyes to become adjusted, in spite of the dim lighting below decks. Standing shivering in spite of thermal underwear on the sharply moving and vibrating deck was a very lonely experience.

Roger and I were called forward to the flight-deck for the thermal-imager recce flight. The sea was very rough with a strong

wind. The occasional faint flash of light at various places on the deck indicated the deck crew doing pre-flight checks, staggering drunkenly against the steep rolling of the ship. The Wessex was 'burning and turning' to hold it in place, and we were escorted to the door, handing our weapons to the crewman before climbing aboard. The TI camera was blocking most of the door and so we had to squeeze round it. Flight Sergeant Doug Fletcher – our self-taught cameraman, the crewman and two pilots were all wearing immersion suits and lifejackets. Roger and I felt vulnerable in our heavy fighting order, and quick-soak, instant-sink combat uniforms.

Take-off under these conditions is always fraught. The pilot has to get the helo 'flying' up into the safety lashings, so that when released, the rolling of the deck doesn't pitch the aircraft into the sea. There are only the briefest of flashes of light to indicate that the straps are about to be removed, another when they're released, and immediately the pilot lifts off into the howling wind as best he can.

Once away in the air and away from the ship, the wind can only slow you down. Nevertheless the need to fly as low as possible to avoid enemy radar, and the total blackness of the night were alarming to say the least. The open door sent very cold air roaring in and very soon my shivering turned to shaking. The fate of the SAS Sea King was very much in my mind during that flight. In the headphones I could hear the pilot and the co-pilot cracking gallows-humour jokes about helicopters crashing into the sea.

It took about 45 minutes to reach the northwest of East Falkland, just north of Fanning Head. We climbed from just above the waves to 300 feet and began a Thermal Imaging sweep of Race Point and Middle Bay to the immediate north. In spite of earlier reports of enemy activity in the area from an SBS patrol, the imaging of the Middle Bay area revealed nothing. We hoped the system was working. We then came south to sweep to the north of the Head itself.

The image on the screen showed the lines of the coast and ridge very sharply, with darker and lighter patches indicating bogs, and a distinct temperature difference between rock and peat. This second sweep showed nothing, until we came round onto higher ground where Port San Carlos settlement lay. To our astonishment, it was ablaze with streetlights and a warm glow from the windows of the weatherboard bungalows – like in 'The Snowman' cartoon. Our sweep took us right over the top of the settlement which (thankfully) dreamed on and remained apparently undisturbed by our interest.

The sweep back along the ridgeline to Fanning Head showed clusters of small but bright glow-worm objects, in pairs, in groups of about fifteen. There were several of these groups to the north of the Head, with one group actually at the top. The TI system worked

extraordinarily well. We'd found our heavy-weapons company.

We continued to sweep along the coast, over Port San Carlos Settlement again, to the area just beyond, and then south from Death Valley Hill and Lookout Hill. We turned back west across San Carlos Water, before over-flying San Carlos Settlement. We then vacuumed Ajax Bay and Wreck Point, before, with a sense of relief at finding no further enemy positions, heading north-west back out to the sea and a long flight back to the warmth and security of *Antrim*.

The landing was tricky in the heavy seas. Once the deck crew had lashed the helicopter down so the pitching of the deck would not throw it over the side, we played through the tape to confirm the enemy locations. Roger and I then clambered out of the helicopter and down the ladders to brief the patrol.

Blinking in the strong light of the admiral's day cabin, we ran through the details of landing-site and enemy locations. With black 'cam' cream on our faces to remove the tell-tale shine of normal skin, individual identities were now masked. The landing-site securing team began humping their heavy bergens up from the galley to the flight deck hangar, leaving them in neat rows for quick identification in the dark.

From the very start, our carefully worked-out fly-off plan hit snags. The huge loads of ammunition we were carrying put the Sea King well over its maximum lift capacity so it couldn't take off. The stick orbat (the people on each helicopter lift) had to be changed rapidly, creating a strange atmosphere of hushed chaos, in the darkness and freezing turmoil of the flight-deck.

Nick Allin and I took off in the third lift. The pilot needed several attempts to lift off the deck because the aircraft was so overloaded. The door was completely blocked by piles of very heavy bergens. The weight of our fully bombed-up belt fighting order rendered the Navy-issue inflatable lifejackets useless had we gone in. So by mutual consent we broke several more regulations and took them off once we were on our way, the SAS' tragic Sea King accident very much on our minds.

This flight only took 25 minutes, as by now the ship had steamed much closer to the Islands. We approached over Middle Point and came in low and steady until the brief coded flash of a shielded torch indicated the landing site. As the pilot made his final approach, a 'T' shape of muted torches came on below to show him the exact spot and the wind direction.

We landed quickly, jumped down, unloaded our kit, then joined a wide circle facing outwards as the roar of the downwash faded and the helicopter had vanished into the darkness.

We lay quietly in the heather staring into the night, waiting for

the next lift to arrive. After the exertions of the landing I was now warm and actually glad to be lying out under the stars in the lee of the hills, which reminded me of the Cape Wrath naval gunnery range in north-west Scotland. This sweet-smelling hillside was free of the hum of ships and the ever-present smell of Avgas and diesel. There was no movement and the air was fresh. Despite the circumstances, I was glad to be on land again.

Faint engine noise alerted us to the returning helo and the landing-site team lined up once again with their torches, first flashing the recognition code letter using one torch, then, when the pilot briefly flashed a light from his cockpit, illuminating the 'T' shape. (The 'T' tells the pilot that the wind is blowing from the top of the 'T', so he must approach from its base.)

During the waiting, cold was now seeping through my layers of clothing. So once the last lift had landed, I was ready to get going. We shouldered the bergens and started off up the ridge towards Fanning Head. We carried a smaller version of the TI observation device, which went at the front of our long and heavily laden 'commando snake'. There were frequent halts to scan ahead, and the odd pause while our suspicious 'tail-end Charlie' (the last man of the 'snake') investigated noises to the rear.

The going was very rough, with enormous tussocks of grass and strange out-crops of what looked like waist-high seaweed and enormous lettuce plants. We were soon perspiring and opening our smocks to ventilate. Perspiration soaks your clothing, making you terribly cold once you stop and cool down. We plodded upwards onto the top of the ridge and sent scouts ahead with the TI to vacuum the ground, which they reported clear.

The top of the ridge was rocky. I was relieved, as this meant it was unlikely to be mined. But we slipped on the wet rocks, stumbling and occasionally falling under the heavy bergens, which was very tiring.

Fanning Head loomed in the darkness. Whenever we stopped, the scout group would move on ahead a little, and the 'snake' would move up to form an outward-facing circle with ankles touching. We became nervous of the Head, which although still beyond effective small-arms range, was beginning to overlook us, so it was possible our progress was being observed.

Then we heard firing coming from dead ground to the northwest of the Head. The whoosh and roar was certainly anti-tank guns firing, and the bangs were possibly artillery and certainly mortars as well.

As the sound was muffled to us, I decided that the weapons were being fired out to sea where our ships were gathering prior to coming in through the strait to San Carlos Water. We were running late, and

as *Antrim* was on station ready to fire I decided to use her to silence the enemy gun positions.

Unfortunately there was a snag with one of her twin-turreted 4.5-inch guns. The rest of the patrol had never experienced ships' guns (or any other big guns) and became impatient. We had a mortar with us carried by Sergeant Archie C, a rotund, but very tough SAS mortar-man who a couple of years earlier had instructed me on a jungle warfare training course in Belize, Central America. By firing the bombs he was carrying in his own bergen, he was lightening his own load – an important consideration for seasoned soldiers. Archie was extremely keen to fire.

We had a whispered disagreement, and unfortunately his impatience got the better of my prudence and about twenty mortar bombs were loosed off in rapid succession to absolutely no effect whatever. As I knew would be the case, their impact, wherever that might have been, could not even be heard let alone observed and adjusted onto a target. On the other hand anyone in our vicinity would certainly have seen the muzzle flash, which advertised our presence rather nicely.

As well as waiting anxiously for the ship to be ready, Nick was having trouble with communications, but by walking around on the top of the hillock, we were able to get through. After the argument about firing the mortars, our troubles with the radio and the delay, there was muttering in the ranks… muted complaining, and worried doubting about the wisdom of waiting so long in the freezing cold. Nick and I were standing about 15 metres away from the rest of the patrol when the ship's radio operator finally reported that they were ready, I ordered her to fire twin salvoes (one shell from each barrel).

We could see the faint flash of *Antrim*'s guns far out in the Sound as the guns were fired.

I ordered our patrol to lie down. The first salvo can, by the nature of the naval system go anywhere. Then followed a silence, an eerie whistling noise and a second, briefer silence as the shells descended. I'd ordered airburst (which explodes 50 feet above the ground) and as it arrived, night turned into day. The hollow crash of the explosions came seconds later. The gaps in between were filled with gasps and expletives from the patrol, who'd never seen naval guns at work. I felt like Merlin unleashing the forces of darkness.

They were bang on target. Apparently at the other end on the gunship, they were broadcasting our radio transmissions over the tannoy. After the anxiety of our helicopter insertion, their fraught passage to the gunline, and the final unleashing of these first shells of the landings, when our message came back, 'On target, 20 salvoes fire for effect', they all cheered.

The forty shells came down two at a time for about one minute. Our patrol remained lying down, while exchanging appreciative expletives. When the bombardment stopped, there was no resumption of the Argentine firing.

We then decided to press on towards the enemy positions under the cover of a sporadic NGS bombardment. This would make our enemy concentrate on his own survival and so be less likely to become aware of our presence. Every minute a shell crashed down.

We tramped along the ridge to the end, with Roger F. and me in front, from where we could observe the northerly slopes of Fanning Head. I peered through the viewer of the TI, found the observation party near the top, then swept the slopes, and was astonished to see two lines of figures moving steadily over the ridgeline down into the valley in front of us. I counted 40, with more coming over, all in our direction. We were outnumbered, so we had to make the most of our position on high ground, along with that other vital military factor – surprise.

We ordered a line to be formed along the ridge with all the machine guns on the flanks, a small fire team behind us to protect from a rear attack, and the mortar set up in the gully behind. We had sixteen GPMGs (General Purpose Machine Guns), one being carried by every second man. These were loaded with tracer ammunition, which burns red in the darkness, so that the streams of fire would be terrifyingly visible to the enemy. Only a battalion, or at the minimum two companies, would be able to deploy as many as sixteen GMPGs.

In my diary I wrote:

> The night was very cold and we chilled rapidly whenever we stopped. The heavy work of moving caused perspiration which made us colder still when we stopped again. We got to our ridge position, moving very carefully with snipers out in front. Initially there was no sign, but then silhouetted against the spur of north Fanning Head we could see six or so figures of men digging in. (Afterwards we found that the shelling had caused them to dig in, their not having bothered until the shells arrived.) I opened up [with the NGS] well beyond them [800m] and crept the fire backwards towards them.
>
> Not only did I not want to hit them, but I did not want to hit *us*!
>
> The bright-red figures on the imager ran around, lay down or just stood still when the shells came down. Then a strange thing was seen – a line of two parallel files of men marched over the spur and lined up on our side, apparently

deciding what to do next.

The figures then started to move towards us, away from their gun position and my NGS shells. We decided this was the time to try our loudspeaker. It was very windy, blowing from the enemy towards us. A stream of tracer was aimed using an Armalite fitted with a night-scope, and then one GMPG opened up on the same line, placing a burst of tracer over their heads.

But predictably I suppose, the loudspeaker that had been so carefully devised, packed and carried, failed to work. Rod Bell tried shouting something about 'Royal Marine desperadoes', but even if they heard, after the shelling and machine-gun fire it must have seemed like the voice of an angry god.

The main enemy group now split, with men moving in different directions, towards and away from us. The situation was very rapidly getting out of control. The Squadron Sergeant-Major in charge of the rear protection party, stamped angrily around below the ridgeline just below Roger and me, swearing with worry and shouting, "This, gentlemen, is *not* the way to do business."

One group of enemy was sitting down as Rod had ordered them to, but there were a number of others trying to sneak off over the spur and back to their gun position. Using tracer rounds from a weapon with a night sight to indicate the target, GPMG bursts were fired at these would-be escapees, initially to cut them off and 'shepherd' them back to the main group, but then directly at them – shooting to kill.

Rod Bell's South American sympathies now broke through, and he became very angry, shouting that he was going down the hill to talk to them, to try to prevent them from being slaughtered. I urged that a section with a radio be sent down to protect him. So in this highly tricky situation, we let our humanitarian instincts get the better of military logic, and split our force in the darkness.

But we were running out of darkness. Dawn was approaching, and we were in a very vulnerable position, overlooked by Fanning Head, which we knew from our thermal sweep in the helo to have enemy on it.

It was not clear what to do. We'd neutralised the 'Fanning Head Mob' as this enemy unit later came to be known, and so had achieved our aim. We should now do something about the enemy in front of us.

Further down the hill, Rod was unable to find them so very sensibly came back when ordered.

With very great reluctance we decided that as the Argentinians were not surrendering, we would have to shoot to kill. We were beginning to feel like butchers, but the knowledge of what was to happen later, and the thought of what would certainly have happened

if they got back to their mortars, guns and anti-tank guns, tempers my remorse.

My diary noted:

> The next problem was the approaching dawn, which would reveal our rather poor position – on a hill being overlooked by Fanning Head. We detected movements on top of the Head and so I shelled it with NGS yet again. We dug shell scrapes (a shallow trench). As it got light we saw enemy trying to get up to the top of the Head and into the bushes at its northern side. We tried to get them to surrender by firing over their heads but in the end we fired at them. They must have thought us terribly bad shots.
>
> Suddenly, shockingly, from off to the right of this action, a long burst of machine-gun tracer fire hit us from the foot of the hill, blasting my shell scrape and ripping the bergen of the man next to me. I forced myself to look up but the enemy had taken cover. Next to me, Wally P who'd been firing up at the Head, wrenched his GPMG round to the right and fired long deafening bursts at a clump of bushes further down the spur. I also put a dozen rounds of rifle fire into this small area. The firing stopped.
>
> A white flag appeared from a group at the bushes halfway up the hill, and a group of men started to walk down towards us. The four that arrived first were very young, uneducated and poorly equipped. Rod questioned them and said that he was very glad his Spanish wasn't as bad as theirs. Their boots had holes and they had one blanket each. They said they'd been flown in a few days previously and had no food except a sheep they'd killed. They said their sergeant and officer had gone off earlier. They also said that their group had several casualties.

A section was sent down the hill to search for enemy wounded – another unsafe thing to do in view of the numbers of enemy that had disappeared in this area, but again our logic was still humanitarian rather than military. They found four casualties suffering from bad gunshot wounds, who were made as comfortable as could be managed with morphine and dressings. They were later flown out to a British hospital ship. This search was a very lengthy process, and thankfully there was no more firing from whoever remained at large from the heavy-weapons company.

It was now completely light, and turning into a beautifully crisp, clear day – ideal for the Argentine Air Force.

Our main landings were running very late, to the alarm of one of the SBS beach recce teams. They were lying in wait right beside an enemy position and didn't know whether to attack it and risk the landing being delayed and themselves overwhelmed, or leave it there and have the beach rendered insecure. I tried to find out what was happening from our people in the Ops Room on *Fearless*, but they didn't know – or wouldn't say.

As it got light we could see ships in the Sound and in San Carlos Water. I flicked through the radio frequencies, and could tell from traffic that the landing-craft were going in. We tied white bandages round our heads like bandanas, the agreed recognition sign that would give us safe passage down through what would be the Parachute Regiment's perimeter once they'd landed.

A British Scout helicopter clattered up from the shoreline, to land on our ridge. SBS commander Jonathan Thomson, a medical officer and two medics clambered out. Jonathan was grim and angry. He'd had been trying to rescue the two-man crew of a Gazelle helicopter that had been shot down by enemy in the Findlay Rocks area behind us. The helo had gone into the sea and the crew were swimming ashore when the Argies machine-gunned them, killing both.

Jonathan was uncharacteristically hard-faced, concerned to take our prisoners off our hands as fast as possible. Jonathan told me he now realised why military textbooks say it's important for prisoners to be taken from their captors to the rear areas so quickly. The Argentine soldiers were flown to one of the ships.

The Squadron Sergeant Major, with all his operational experience, had been right. As this news went round the patrol, we resolved not to take so much trouble over surrenders, although also agreeing we were not going descend to the depths of killing for no purpose – as these Argentinians seemed to have done.

Despite all this, the rising run was now warming through my layers of chilled clothing, on the clearest, most beautiful day. As I was spading into the rocky ground to deepen my shell scrape, I began thinking this whole thing bizarrely identical to the various big NATO exercises we'd done so many times before.

But in that moment, the first Argentine Mirage jet screamed in from the north, 50 feet or so west and just below our position.

As it flashed through, I saw it was painted in air show colours – a gaudy camouflage in contrast to the oily, drab, green and black of our own Harriers. The underbelly was white with red-and- green stripes, and the pilot wore a white helmet with black sun visor.

The second of this first pair flashed through, both too quickly for any action on our part. They were using the narrow gap between the Head and our ridge as a screen from the missiles now being fired from

the fleet down in San Carlos Water. We positioned our phalanx of GPMGs to put a hail of lead into the path of the next batch.

Down in the anchorage, *Canberra*, huge and white, stationary in the water, seemed the most impossibly easy target. The two LPDs (Landing Platform Dock: *Fearless* and *Intrepid*) also looked very vulnerable, as the destroyers and missile frigates steamed urgently into their positions as air defending 'goal-keepers'.

More Argentine jets appeared out of the clear air. Their desperate, low-level twisting and turning, and the roar and explosion of the Sea Cat and Sea Wolf missiles were too far away to be more than just background noises. We saw smoke billowing from the stern of *Ardent,* where we later learned our liaison officer Captain Bob Harmes was fire-fighting prior to his first sinking, and heard confusing reports over the radio of which ships had been hit.

These first air raids were strange and surreal, as we sat in the bright, clear sunlight on that wind-swept hill.

With the prisoners taken off our hands, we shouldered our kit and set off down the ridge to the eastern side of Partridge Valley. We moved down through the brilliant green and brown heather in a large diamond formation with one section forward, each section moving as an arrowhead spread out over a very wide area to minimise the number of people who could be hit at once in any sort of attack.

We were still nervous about any Argies who might still be alive and roaming around, but more so about entering 3 Para's area, and any trigger-happy paratroopers who might have forgotten we were coming. With our long hair and combat waistcoats, we didn't look terribly British.

After cutting back up a ridge we descended to a sandy beach on the west side of Fanning Harbour, to meet the LCM (Landing Craft Medium[4]) that would take us back to *Intrepid*. We gained the shelter of the cove just before the second wave of Argentine air attacks swept in. This time, the radars on the 'flat tops' (carriers *Hermes* and *Invincible*) gave good early warning to the landing-force.[5] The enemy jets had to fight their way through the Harriers' Combat Air Patrol (known as the 'CAP'), which reported their direction to the landing force ships, which we were able to pick up on our radio net.

Knowing the approach bearing and ETA of the next air raid allowed us to arrange our GPMGs so as to put up a screen of lead through which any aircraft that flew over our heads would have to fly. A lookout was positioned on the hill in the direction of the attack, with the 'curtain of lead' organised to be fired upwards from 100 metres further along the beach. As soon as the lookout saw the aircraft

he would raise his arms and we would open fire into the air above our heads. The 100 metres distance would give the rounds time to get up to the jets before they flashed overhead at speeds of up to 675 mph.[6]

As soon as we'd taken up our positions, another air raid came screaming in: four Argentine jets sliced down through the fleet flying very, very low, at least two were Mirages. Having dropped their bombs, they screamed directly over our quiet cove running for the cover of Fanning Head and home. This took them right through our lead curtain.

As they flashed away over the scree slope at the end of the beach, bits flicked off the tail of one of the Mirages and brown smoke started to come out of its side. All four vanished from sight, and it's impossible to say for certain whether the explosion we heard was the Mirage hitting the water, but he certainly wasn't going to make it back to Argentina.

There were shouts of congratulation, then expletives as our little cove was suddenly filled with explosions, and we took cover. This seemed rather mysterious, until I realised that with every weapon in San Carlos Water firing in the direction of these four jets, and them vanishing northwards over our heads, the missile and gun operators would be aiming towards us. So when the rockets ran out of fuel or the operators lost sight of the target, the missiles were hitting our beach and the cliffs at the end.

Our LCM arrived. Between air raids, the coxwain nipped out into the bright, fresh sunlight of the anchorage. Eventually we were delivered back into the cavernous, dark exhaust-fumed atmosphere of *Intrepid's* now very busy stern dock.

I found the route to the wardroom impassable because the ship was at Action Stations with all hatches bolted. I therefore decided to climb up onto the forrad Sea Cat deck and go in through the hatch below the bridge. This was incredibly foolish, as I rapidly discovered.

I heaved my kit up on to the upper deck, and very suddenly another air raid came in. The Sea Cat missiles were just feet away from me, and started to rotate in the peculiarly sinister, jerky movements they use when tracking a target. As the Oerlikon guns on the bridge just above started to pound, a sailor emerged from the Sea Cat missile stowage space, dragged me into the darkness and bolted the hatch.

As my eyes adjusted to the dim red emergency lighting, I could see two other sailors crouching at the far end, waiting to reload the Sea Cats to fire once they'd fired. We huddled together smoking cigarettes, listening to the sitreps over the tannoy from the Officer of the Watch, and grimacing as the Sea Cats launched with their bang, roar and whoosh just outside the door.

It was over an hour before the Officer of the Watch stood us down. As surreptitiously as I could manage, I opened forrad hatch, and escaped to the warmth of the Wardroom, and its comfortable illusion of safety.

But a few hundred metres north, in the beautiful sandy cove from which we'd embarked into the LCM back to *Intrepid*, just off shore small dolphins had been jumping, with a pair of seals bobbing about like old men in a bathtub. The noise of our war must have been a novelty to them on that first morning of air raids. But I had a strong feeling that the peace and tranquillity I'd so suddenly and violently shattered the night before might never be fully restored.

# Chapter 7. HMS *Intrepid* in Bomb Alley

HMS *Intrepid* was FO1's home base, where we kept our Gemini inflatable assault boat and outboard motors, spare radios and batteries, a huge pile of rations and ammunition, and all our spare personal kit.

I had a cabin, located in the small passage to the left of the Wardroom door, in which I dumped myself and my kit whenever we got back. A large nylon parachute bag contained my belongings, with toiletries handy at the top ready for immediate use. 'FLYCO', the ever-cheerful[7] Lt Commander Roy Laney, occupied the cabin opposite. One of the most busy men on the shop. Roy looked after both my bag and my interests when we were out.

The other empty cabins in the passage were also full of kit, belonging to various other nocturnal folk including my friends Chris Brown and John Hamilton (an SAS captain later killed at Port Howard), and other shadowy people. We would appear, pale, haggard, and filthy, stay a few nights, then vanish again in our separate directions. I'd start the night sleeping on my own but would then be would be taken over, stealthily, without the lights being turned on. In the morning there'd be snoring, dead-tired bodies in all the bunks and on the floor, weapons ranging from pistols to rocket launchers hanging on pegs and lying on desk tops. The corridor outside would be blocked with muddy bergens and neatly piled webbing, with the peculiarly distinct smell of peat and rifle oil.

Lieutenant-Commander Roy Laney handled the workings of Flyco, organising all the flying to and from the ship for twelve of the twenty-four hours. He virtually lived in the glass-windowed control box that overlooked the flight deck, from which everything from the servicing of aircraft, their landings and takings off, refuelling, reception of wounded and prisoners of war, etc., were handled. I was constantly poking my head into their glass-fronted office, wanting to be taken to other ships or asking for estimated times of flights. In spite of the pressure and constant confusion under which they worked, they always bent over backwards to help.

Roy also collected my mail, shoving it into the top of my para bag so I could get at it if he was working in the Flyco whenever I got back aboard. He never asked about what we'd been doing, but always greeted me with a large beer even when the wardroom was closed.

The Wardroom Chief Petty Officer was another marvellous man, remaining helpful and kind in even the direst circumstances. He'd left the Navy when *Intrepid* had gone to the shipyard for its refit. When the Naval postings branch requested the previous ship's company come

back for Operation Corporate, our CPO had returned from well-earned retirement in Civvie Street to run his wardroom. (There were days to come, when 'Bomb Alley' was at its most intense, when he admitted to doubts about having made the right decision. The bombing made us all feel like that…)

Coming back on board *Intrepid* to a hot shower, food and sleep, was wonderful. Roy would wave from Flyco as we ran out of the helicopter and humped our kit over to the ramp. When the engine noise had died away he would make some joke about us over the flight deck tannoy. We would heave our kit over the slippery flight-deck and down the steep ramp to the lower tank-deck where our mountain of food, kit and ammunition lay. The boys' mess-deck was very close by, through a watertight door.

Having got their stuff stowed, I'd walk back up the ramp to the flight-deck, then along the starboard rail to the hatch that led into the galley area and the senior rates' dining hall. A short climb up another ladder onto the Wardroom flat then, passing the Gun-Room and the Wardroom galley, I could enter the sitting-room-cum-dining-room of the wardroom proper.

The ship's officers, working their usual watches, tried very hard to keep wardroom life as normal as possible. There'd be tea as usual at 1600, the bar would open at 1800, and if we were deemed to be 'at sea' there'd be big, chunky hot chips alongside dishes of relish on the counter. There was a continuous – and at time heated – debate as to whether San Carlos Water counted as being 'at sea'. However despite this, the Wardroom Chief usually provided chips anyway. It was a very determined 'business as usual' operation: newspapers on the tables, but dog-eared and hopelessly out of date, unclaimed letters jamming the letter-rack, and the ever-cheerful and sometimes cheeky mess staff topping up the constant supply of coffee on the hob.

During daylight while there were air raids, the furniture would be lashed back to the walls and central pillars, with anyone not at Action Stations lolling in the armchairs or lying on the floor reading *Motor Magazine* or *Illustrated London News* for the fifth time. We mumbled at each other through the grubby, white cotton of the anti-flash hoods.

The chapel was now permanently occupied by Special Forces operational planning – split down the middle into two denominations: one half SAS, the other SBS. So the padre held regular Holy Communion services in a wide variety of places around the ship – wherever he could find a free space.

A hot shower was our most enjoyable *après*-operation activity – one of the greatest advantages we enjoyed over the troops now frantically digging in ashore. After the Fanning Head operation, I'd emptied my pockets then stood fully clothed under the shower to

wash my clothing in layers. Then I'd got myself completely lathered up and shampooed. I was eyes shut and fumbling to turn on the water for the rinse phase, when the tannoy blasted out an 'Air Raid Imminent' and ordered everyone to take cover.

I debated the pros and cons of climbing into my soaking-wet clothes and donning anti-flash covered in soap. But then I decided I couldn't be bothered. I was rinsing my hair when the deck literally just above my head reverberated with the pumping bang of the Oerlikons. Then there was the clatter of the next-door GPMGs and the whoosh of the Sea Darts as the raid came in.

Having foolishly placed myself in this situation, I continued as if inhabiting a different and more peaceful, soapy world. But afterwards, the thought of my completely bare body and a flash fire made me shiver.

It was on 21 May, the morning we came back on board after the Fanning Head raid, that San Carlos Water earned its nickname 'Bomb Alley'. The first captured Argie pilot said they'd named it 'Death Valley'. Both were equally appropriate.

It was ideal flying weather for the Argies, unnaturally bright and clear. The Falklands experts had said the clearness of the air would make things appear much closer than they really were – which to soldiers well-practised in the judging of distances, was another peculiarity of this strangely beautiful place.

The Daggers, Mirages and A4 Skyhawks seemed like Airfix models as they came screaming in over the low hills surrounding San Carlos Water. The LPDs, RFAs, and particularly the 'Great White Whale' herself *Canberra*, looked terribly vulnerable.

The Navy's 'goalkeeper ships' were getting hit. This was inevitable as they were positioned in the most likely attack approaches, and also it was said, because the enemy pilots had been told to go for our naval escorts.

I think the latter explanation less likely to be true. The enemy pilots had just split seconds to acquire a target and carry out their weapon-release drills, while trying to avoid missiles and flak. I think they attacked the first thing they saw – which would be the ships placed at the points at which aircraft would first appear. Purely logically, it wouldn't make sense to target the escorts above other shipping. They were the most dangerous targets, which could be replaced from UK, whereas the troops and their troop-ships could not – and were also the most vulnerable.

The loss of *Canberra,* such a large and well-loved ship with so many people on board, would have put the whole expedition in jeopardy. The political as well as military implications would have

been huge, as would the problem of getting us safely back home again afterwards.

The daylight hours were filled with Red Alerts, air raids and tense waiting. The constant pipes from the Bridge were now providing useful information: the number, direction and type of air raids on their way in, the number of casualties and, most important of all for general morale, the number of Argies 'splashed'.

On the first day we shot down 18, to the loss of one Harrier, with *Ardent* being set on fire then later sunk, the *Argonaut* severely damaged and *Antrim* having a bomb through the flight-deck on which we'd so recently been standing – and which thankfully had not gone off.

The tally was vitally important, allowing every man on board to judge whether we'd be able to withstand this enormous Argentine reaction to our landing.

The Argentine Air Force effort was redoubled on the Sunday, wave after wave of jets coming screaming through, running the Royal Navy's air defence gauntlet, frantically dropping bombs then jinking and weaving their way northwards, to face the Harriers on combat air patrol astride their route home.

My diary reports:

> *Sunday 23 May:* No respecters of the Sabbath, these Argies. It's been another air-raid day – with a progression of sudden, very terse pipes:
>
> "Air raid warning Red."
>
> "Raid imminent"
>
> "Raid now 40 miles red and closing"
>
> "Two Skyhawks and three Mirages detected"
>
> "CAP [Combat Air Patrol] moving south to close."
>
> "CAP dog-fight 10 miles south"
>
> "Air raid imminent, air raid imminent, 4 Skyhawks from astern."
>
> At this point we throw ourselves on to the floor, me under the stout oak wardroom table, and cover our heads with our hands.
>
> "This is the PWO speaking [Principle Warfare Officer, pronounced 'peewoe'], the score so far is two Skyhawks and a Mirage. *Antelope* is reported hit."
>
> "This is the Captain speaking; *Antelope* looks to be OK, *Brilliant* and *Argonaut* each claim hits…"
>
> Rumour and counter-rumour abound:
>
> "*Antelope* has a hole in her starboard side but seems to

be steaming alright."

"The air raid of the six Mirages is about 80 miles due NW and seems to be holding."

"The air raid seems to be escorting a C130 transport aircraft possibly with a food resupply. There are several ideas on this one"

"Air raid Condition Yellow. Relax anti-flash."

Everyone gets up and pulls off the white asbestos hoods and gloves, the interrupted briefings and planning sessions continue.

"Air Condition Red. Don anti-flash. Raid detected 40 miles and closing."

"Raid is 6 Mirages, CAP moving from *Invincible* to intercept."

"Raid Imminent. From starboard bow. Take cover. Take cover."

Everyone literally hits the deck and the ship reverberates with the clatter of machine guns and the steady popping of the Oerlikons. The 'bang-whoosh' of the Sea Darts as they go off, adds to the racket, which fades as soon as it started.

"CAP has shot down one Skyhawk, and two Mirages are believed destroyed."

When jets are hit by missiles, they completely explode so you'd think that they were never there and that the missile simply went off in mid-air. One second there's a jet screaming along, then just a brown cloud or nothing at all.

The missiles kill using an 'expanding rod' – a bendy steel rod compressed tightly down from about 100 feet long to form a single 6" diameter cone inter-packed with explosive. The missile has a sensor that explodes the rod outwards at a certain distance from the aircraft, which is simply chopped up by the scything tumble of now uncompressed metal.

When jets get hit by guns, they generally lose bits then crash. If a vital part is hit they explode leaving a small oily, brownish-black cloud.

The Argies are at present losing about 50%, which cannot be good for their morale. They don't seem to veer away when the Sea Darts are launched, which is a steered missile and therefore not nearly as good as a 'fire and forget' missile like the Sea Wolf. Bob Harmes was on *Ardent,* which was sunk yesterday, but we've heard that he's OK."

We heard a patrol from 3 Para had been ambushed by about 50 Argies. The grid location was only a few thousand metres from where we'd been dropped by helicopter two nights previously.

This was a great blow, it seemed to me that these could only be remnants of the Argentine company from Fanning Head. We'd found only a few bodies, and taken less than a dozen prisoners. It looked like we'd allowed most of them to escape.

My diary entry read:

> Eight 3 Para casualties were brought on board. Two were left on the wardroom floor for most of the afternoon.
>
> They were the worst, bullet wounds in the head and both thought likely to die. One had a fractured skull and was haemorrhaging into his face, his head and face slowly swelling up. He had a drip up [intravenous drip] and his eyes opened occasionally, but blankly. Only a very good surgeon with the best facilities could have tried to sort him out. The other was worse, a bullet in his head. His eyes were open and kept darting about, even seeming to follow what was going on, but he had that very disturbing blankness of expression that all serious head wounds seem to have. They were both very pale and still, heads swathed in blood-soaked first field dressings with bits of mud and heather where their mates had patched them up.
>
> I stayed with them for an hour or so to give the medic a coffee break. I felt physically sick because they were so corpse-like, and mentally sick because they could have been shot by enemy that'd escaped from us that first morning.
>
> They were taken away later this afternoon, probably dead. They were both very young blokes.
>
> I reckon that Paras will be undergoing a radical reassessment of the situation. Their future ops will be fairly ruthlessly prosecuted.

That sad and reflective diary entry was very soon overtaken by events. The two head-injury cases were flown ashore. The surgeons operated all night, saving them both. One woke from the anaesthetic and quoted his identity number when asked.

The ambush itself turned out not to have been Argentine, but a 'Blue on Blue' accident, own troops firing on each other. A 3 Para patrol had returned to their battalion lines from an unexpected direction, and amid confusion had been fired on by other companies in the same battalion, in an intense fire fight that lasted some time. Thankfully, because the ranges were around a thousand metres, the outer limits at which 7.62mm rounds are effective, the impact of the

bullets was much less, allowing the casualties to recover from wounds that at lesser ranges would have been fatal.

Much later on, I was told that a lot of bodies had been discovered in the area north of Fanning Head, mostly killed by shell splinters. I felt regret that I had killed them, but also relief from my nagging worry about effect of our 'humanitarian conduct' of the operation. It seemed that after all, I'd not left a group of survivors who'd gone on to kill our friends.

Once back aboard *Intrepid* I wrote a letter home.

After I'd posted it into the Wardroom collection box, I began thinking about what I'd written, and asked the post orderly if I could retrieve it. This must have been a common situation, as he didn't look at all surprised.

It was a dreadful letter, full of matter-of-fact statements that were fine for me, but would make my parents blood run cold back in sleepy Oxford. So I decided to write completely innocuous letters, one of which I reproduce here:

> Well here we are, actually in the Falklands, which are not unlike NW Scotland, except that it is sunny at present, although when the wind blows it is very cold. The air is very clear and you can see for miles.
>
> The ships are pretty well battened down all the time and we spend a good deal of it under the wardroom tables wearing our white hoods and gloves, telling jokes. We eat 'action snacks,' have 'action cups of coffee' and 'action soup', etc. etc. All this action stuff couldn't feed a rabbit so is a bit of a contradiction! We get a big stew in the evenings when the action bit is relaxed, so we all top up.
>
> I'm sharing a cabin with Chris Brown and we have managed to prevent anyone else from encroaching. This is just as well as we have a mountain of kit between us. I have acquired, of all things, a fighter pilot's helmet. The others who arrived here more recently are crammed four to a cabin, so we are sitting pretty.
>
> There are many animals, birds and fish here in startling profusion to contrast the rather sparse scenery and barrenness. The heather is in fact like out-of-control lettuce and very hard to walk through. The tussock grass is very much higher than its Brit counterpart and is reputed to contain fierce penguins that attack you as soon as look at you, which live in holes! There are seals, dolphins and even monster walruses that attack Land Rovers without hesitation.

Despite the Navy's attempts at normalising things wherever possible, life on board the ships was becoming very strange. All operational planning took place using Zulu time, i.e. UK time, ensuring there could be no confusion over signals sent from the UK, and the coordination of operations across three different time zones – emanating from UK or Ascension – like for example air supply drops.

All we had to do was get used to sunrise being around 11am and sunset at 10:30pm. The ships watches all got up at their normal time of 7am local, 10am Zulu, ate breakfast then went to action stations ready for the first air raids. These generally arrived fairly soon after that, and didn't stop until 10 or 11 Zulu at night. 'Action snacks' – hot dogs, soup, sandwiches, and 'nutty' (chocolate and other sweetie bars) carried in respirator bags, kept hunger at bay until a cooked supper at midnight.

On *Intrepid,* the PWO took to using very old, traditional Royal Navy pipes – one presumes from the Napoleonic wars, to announce air raids, which I found strangely comforting. Sadly I can only remember the one:

"Air Raid Warning. Don anti-flash. Knock out pipes."

"Air Raid Warning Yellow. Relax anti-flash. One, all round."

This always made me think of our predecessors on the gun decks of tiny wooden warships. Having fired their guns broadside into the enemy ships, then with the helm turned away from the enemy and having taken the wounded below and reloaded, they were allowed to relax, smoking their clay pipes until the ship came downwind once more, again bringing their guns to bear on the enemy.

On several occasions when our ships were attacked, the Argentine's thousand-pound iron bombs failed to explode, passing through the superstructure and out the other side, or lodging harmlessly to be dealt with by bomb-disposal. It seemed that the armourers loading the jets back at the Argentine bases were incorrectly setting the bombs' safety fuses. These fuses consist of a small wind-vane device which rotates in the air to measure the distance the bomb has travelled, arming it only after a predetermined interval, to prevent the blast occurring close enough to the fragile aircraft to damage it.

When our bomb clearance guys examined unexploded bombs, the fuses were correctly set according to the manufacturers' specifications, but were intact with time still to run. This was probably because the bombing approaches were being made at much lower heights than

usual, to avoid our flak and missiles. But because these bombs had never been used in a real war against hostile ships, nobody had realised just how desperately low the pilots would fly.

We were ordered not to make any mention of this in our letters home, as it would be simple for enemy armourers to set the bombs to explode earlier. There was no censorship of our letters as it was felt we all understood the problem and could be trusted to be sensible. This specific point was emphasised to everyone several times.

But the night after the commander of *Intrepid* had again reminded us not to mention the fuses in our letters home, the World Service of the BBC announced it for us. The freedom to print the truth is obviously a cornerstone of democracy, but it would seem that editorial common sense practiced by media professionals is concerned with selling copy rather than with any other implications a story might have.

Much later I learned more about this from General Sir David Ramsbotham, who worked in the MoD throughout the Falklands War as the Director Public Relations Army. He told me that two days after HMS Glasgow was hit, it was MoD officials in London who revealed the bomb fusing story to journalists – which these journalists published. And then, two days later, MoD officials gave the same briefing to some American journalists, with additional speculation about faulty fusing mechanisms, elderly equipment, and the aircraft flying too low for the usual fuse timings to work.

Despite the obvious benefit to the Argentine Air Force of these very serious breaches of security by MoD officials, it took three complete days – until 23 May for the Chiefs of Staff to effect a complete ban on Government officials telling journalists about the unexploded bombs…[8] By which time it was too late.

# Chapter 8. The Fox Bay Raid

A couple of days after the war ended, I visited Fox Bay settlement, at the south of the large island of West Falkland.

This small, sheep-rearing community is situated to either side of the bay itself, where it narrows into a small estuary. Several farmhouses are grouped around a jetty, where a rusty cargo vessel lay holed and aground in the mud. The houses are weatherboard with corrugated iron roofs, their small gardens enclosed by low wooden fences.

The settlement is surrounded by wet, green turf and low hills. There are no trees, and when the sun shines, the sea gleams blue, the flocks of gulls are brilliant white and the heather is bright green with tints of brown and purple.

Two decades later, I was to return again to Fox Bay with my fifteen-year-old son William. We fished, explored the beaches that hadn't been mined, and he alarmed me by finding ammunition, lenses from gun sights, and missile casings.

When it's not raining, Fox Bay is a very beautiful place, and completely peaceful – at least it was, until the Argies and then the Task Force arrived.

On 22 May, Major Jonathan Thomson, the Officer Commanding the Special Boat Squadron, got us all together in the main galley of HMS *Intrepid*. For more than an hour, with the clattering and shouting of the kitchen in the background, he talked through the tasks we were to undertake for the next phase of the operation.

Outside, the air over the ships in San Carlos Water was filled with the clatter of helicopters, Sea Kings and the trusty older Wessex, often with large nets suspended underneath carrying less fragile things like ration boxes, jerry cans or crates of ammunition, shuttling relentlessly from ship to shore unloading the incredible amount of stores the 'Loggies' had crammed into the ships. In the bowels of *Intrepid* the piles of equipment were melting away to reveal the extent of their foresight.

Behind the rows of vehicles, rations, barbed wire and ammunition, there appeared enormous lengths of piping and some enigmatic crates. Nobody knew what this was, until a group of Commando Engineers arrived asking for their water pumping kit, their enquiries greeted with blank faces, until somebody remembered this mysterious piping. The Engineers totally filled an LCM with this gear – a water-pumping pipeline with huge rubber torpedoes, to be filled with water from a ship then towed ashore to be plugged into the

shore-based part of the system.

Landing craft chugged to and fro, while dotted across the green hillsides paratroopers and commandos deepened their trenches while sentries scanned the horizon, GPMGs at the ready. It was bitterly cold, wet and windy.

In the noisy warmth of *Intrepid's* main galley, Jonathan Thomson told us that while the off-load and defensive preparations continued at San Carlos, Special Forces were to push inland, as close to Argentine positions around Port Stanley as possible, probing and testing their strengths and weaknesses.

The SBS were to investigate the northern coastline of East Falkland, especially the indented shore of San Salvador Water, into which, in due course, 3 Commando Brigade might move. In addition, we were to keep the Argentine garrison in West Falkland occupied to prevent them interfering with the San Carlos bridgehead area, until they could be dealt with properly. This latter task was to be my concern.

The scene in the galley was warm and cheerful. Once business was done people stayed on for a cup of tea, greetings being shouted across the room and much good-natured chaffing. We wore a peculiar mixture of green and brown assorted mountaineering clothing and normal camouflage military stuff. The long hair and beards fitted in with the general tone of the gathering, like a convention of friendly pirates.

"How are the Gunners then?"

"We're all right judging from the state of you."

"Dropped any short lately?"

The Royal Artillery's' uncomplimentary nickname 'the Drop Shorts' refers to shells that 'drop short' onto friendly troops. This happens, but rarely, and with mortars too, and is generally the result of battlefield confusion, infantry advancing too quickly and of mistaken identity.

Nick Allin was very quick to bite back on such occasions:

"Yeah, loads. Drop one on you if you like?"

"Don't mess with that lot, for fuck's sake. They're actually quite useful… at times."

The Special Boat Squadron guys were impressed with naval gunfire and keen to use more of it. This was to be the key to the bottling up of the West Falkland garrison.

The islands of West Falkland seemed to be occupied by an enemy brigade. A battalion plus were occupying Fox Bay, with artillery, anti-aircraft batteries, helicopters and a field hospital, and a similar force at Port Howard in the north, with other smaller garrisons in the more

remote western islands. Both Fox Bay and Port Howard had airstrips, which were probably still in use and therefore capable of mounting helicopter-borne counterattacks on our anchorage at San Carlos.

The rhetoric from Buenos Aires stressed that should Stanley fall, the fight would continue in the west, with reinforcements being flown in from Argentina, and Fox Bay and Port Howard being strongly defended.

Even without reinforcement, if we tried to attack and capture either settlement, we'd need more than a brigade for each – which we did not have. They were both very good defensive positions and easy to defend, so our siege had to start as soon as possible.

The Royal Navy had the Falkland Sound pretty much sealed off, with only an occasional Argentine-crewed fishing boat creeping through at night. On one occasion, in daylight, the Navy detected a particular boat known to be making regular trips, so the SBS were tasked to capture it. This operation was mounted in a very short time, with the familiar rushing around and pandemonium.

Unfortunately, in the intervening period, Harriers returning to *Hermes* spotted the boat, and seeing military uniforms, attacked and severely damaged it. The SBS had been keen to capture this boat, for use as a base for small-boat operations, and thereafter spirited back to the UK. Instead the Harrier attack provided the SBS with a bloody first-aid exercise, patching up seriously injured Argentine military personnel, and the fishing boat sank.

Eventually the Navy sealed off all Argentine ship movement, and the blockade of West Falkland was made absolute.

The task of keeping the enemy in the west out of mischief was given to a single SBS Troop, consisting of three four-man reconnaissance teams and a headquarters – a big task for such a small number of men. This was because once all the Special Forces' tasks had been identified and resources allocated, there was only the one Troop remaining to do this job.

So how could we achieve such an aim?

After much discussion, it was decided to plan a series of night raids, to insert FO1 close enough to the enemy positions so we could shell them with naval gunfire. Being as close in to the targets as possible meant that the effect of the fire can be assessed and adjusted as required, as well as to avoid damage to houses, and civilian casualties. Once the Argies had made the effort of repairing their installations, these raids would be repeated. The draining effect this would have on enemy morale in the west, we hoped, would sap any desire to interfere with our main operation in the east.

We wanted to hit both Port Howard and Fox Bay on subsequent nights, to achieve maximum impact and confusion. I therefore decided to split FO1 in two, both groups equipped with the necessary radios, plus an SBS recce team. Four is the absolute minimum number with which you can operate, because if one man is injured, two can carry him while the third goes ahead as scout.

For this phase of the operation, I was to have Steve Hoyland, Nick Allin and Des Nixon, with Tim Bedford having drawn the short straw, remaining behind as our anchorman to look after things on the ship.

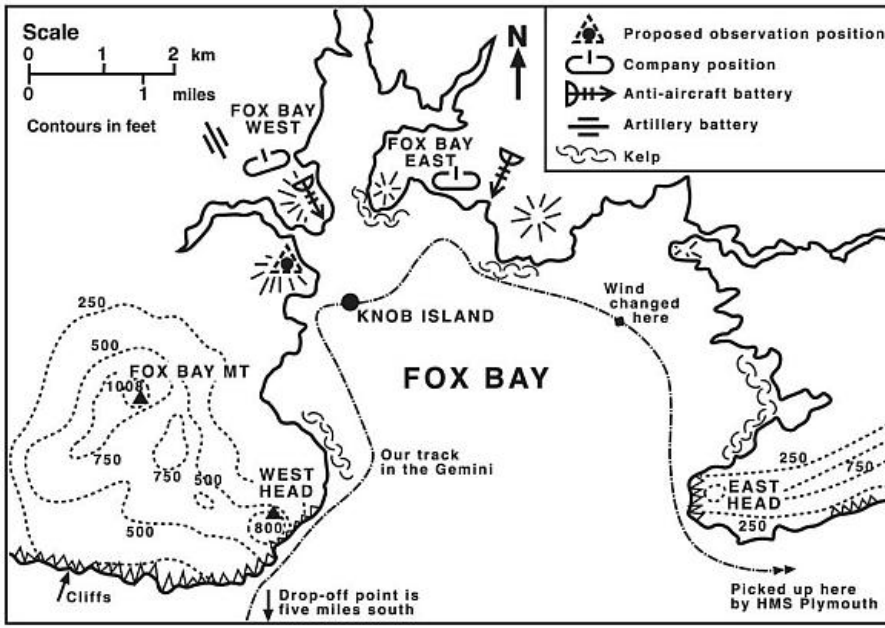
Nick and Des were to go to Port Howard, and Steve and I to Fox Bay. At first we planned three-day operations, inserting on the first night, recce'ing all day, shelling on the second night and, if the hours of darkness ran out, boating back out to sea to be picked up on the third night. In the end, a lack of time and the need to simplify things led us to do the whole thing over just one night – a very busy shift.

There was a reasonable amount of information available to us about Fox Bay. An SAS patrol had just been extracted after lurking there for several weeks. But although we were able to debrief them, they could only tell us what they'd observed from a distance – which wasn't much. They hadn't gone anywhere near the settlement, or troop enemy positions. The GCHQ radio intercept people had been monitoring transmissions, so we already knew there was at least a battalion of infantry, an artillery battery, a number of anti-aircraft batteries, a fuel dump, an unused airfield and a hospital.

The SBS Troop commander was Lieutenant David Boyd, another friend from RM Poole and an Irishman. We'd first met several years earlier when he'd been training as a member of NP8901, before starting the year-long tour in the Falklands. Soon after his return to England he'd married his Falkland girlfriend Colleen, then stayed on at Poole for SBS selection and training.

For Dave Boyd, Operation Corporate was personal business. Although his wife was safe in the UK, her parents were still at their home in a remote place to the north of Stanley. For him, it was as if we were ejecting the Argies from part of Ireland, and his enthusiasm for this job was infectious.

***Fox Bay Raid Map***




Our first raid would be on Fox Bay, the southerly of the two settlements. Accompanying Steve Hoyland and me, Dave Boyd brought five of his section. Sergeant Pete Beavers was the coxswain of the boat. We would use an RIB – 'Rigid Inflatable Boat' belonging to the ship that would launch us and fire the shells. Pete Beavers was well known in the Special Boat world as the ferocious canoeing and boating expert who made that phase of the SBS selection course so hard. Pete is slight with a gaunt face and crew cut, a frightening sight for the poor unfortunates just embarking on their basic 6-month Swimmer Canoeist course.

Our gunship for the raid was to be HMS *Plymouth* with her twin-barrelled, Mark 6, 4.5-inch gun, firing 55-pound shells up to a range of 18,000 yards. As we were using *Plymouth's* RIB, all we needed to bring were the radios, lightweight dry suits, lifejackets, webbing, fighting order and weapons, with a couple of days' emergency rations (mainly chocolate and biscuits) plus stacks of ammunition. A GPMG was put in the bow of the boat with several 66mm anti-tank rocket launchers. This was our 'trending' favourite, because of the 66's very satisfying effect on snipers, and the sheer impact of their tank-killer rocket.

Under the dry suits we wore complete combat kit and many layers, pockets stuffed in the usual manner with ammunition, field dressings and food. Over all this we wore as many sweaters as would fit. When later we struggled into the dry suits, the wriggling and the pulling on of the rubber soon had sweat pouring off us – whereas after a few minutes being soaked in the very cold Atlantic Ocean as it

swamped over the bow of the RIB, we were soon shivering and getting colder. Over the top of the dry suits, conventional webbing was replaced by combat waistcoats, in which pistols, rifle magazines, torches and knives could more handily be carried.

We transferred to *Plymouth* on the afternoon of Tuesday 25 May by LCM in San Carlos Water, nipping across between air raids. 148 Battery's former battery sergeant major WO2 'Brum' Richards was our Liaison Officer for the raid, already on board going through the gunnery procedures. The officers and crew of *Plymouth* were impressed with Brum – and made a point of saying so – which augured well for our operation. Brum was by a long way the most experienced Liaison Officer we had, having been in the NGS business all his military life. I was delighted that he was to be at the other end of the radio.

I gave Brum a copy of my fire plan and we talked it over before speaking to the PWO (Principle Warfare Officer) and gun-direction crew. Pete Beavers was at the stern sorting out the RIB, and organising the launching and recovery routines. The captain of *Plymouth*, David Pentreath, received us in his day cabin where, surrounded by charts and polished mahogany, looking over his half-spectacles, he listened very carefully to the fine detail of our plan.

Preparations complete, we settled down to an excellent steak and glass of Beaujolais. As last light and the threat of air attack faded, we sailed slowly out of San Carlos and turned left to go south down Falkland Sound toward Fox Bay. Once in the Sound, *Plymouth* wound up her engines and steamed flat out towards the drop-off point, so that we would have the maximum amount of darkness to wreak havoc on the Argentinians.

The drop-off point was five miles south of West Head .Then, once we entered the Bay, there was another mile and a half for us to run in the Gemini before our landing point. We'd motor in towards the Head in its lee in case there was an enemy observation or radar-post, or a gun position on the high ground.

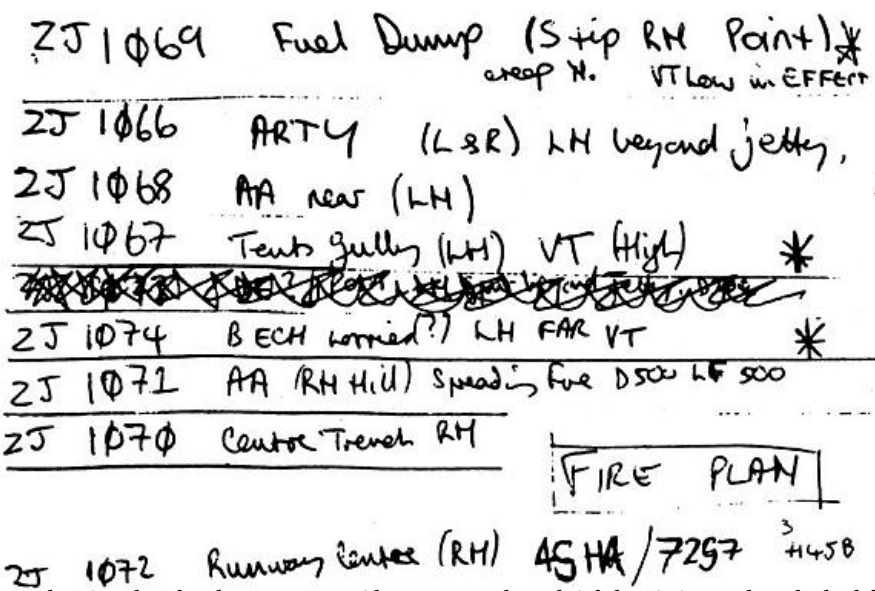
The Chatelaine (the appropriately named portable thermal imaging device we'd used so successfully at Fanning Head) was in a waterproof box in the bottom of the boat. We wanted to vacuum-scan the coast as we crept into Fox Bay to be as sure as possible that it was clear. An outboard motor is surprisingly quiet, and its sound doesn't carry very far, and if we kept as close to shore as possible, our image on an enemy radar-screen would be lost in reflections from the coastline.

The weather, calm back in San Carlos, was bad and getting worse here, Fox Bay being notorious for sudden changes. The sky was

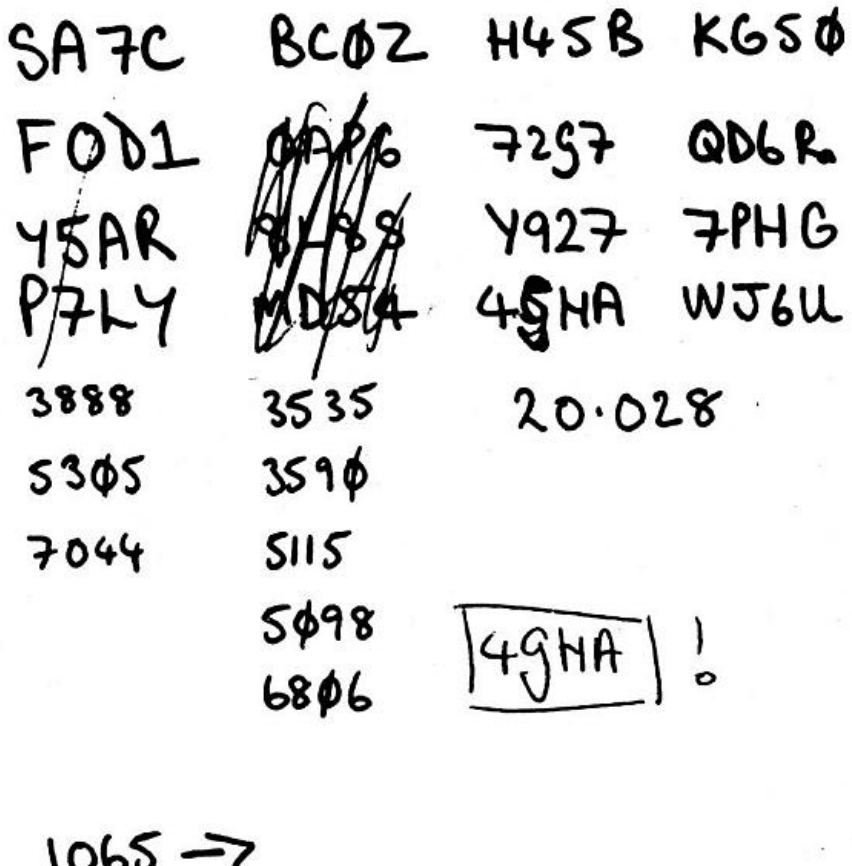
overcast, with a very stiff wind, and the sea was getting up.

The RIB was suspended from the davits and we stood huddled in the darkness getting our 'night sight', clutching rifles, faces blackened, wearing black balaclavas with dark-coloured woollen climbing hats on top, to try to keep our heads warm. The deck was taut with vibration as *Plymouth* steamed flat out through the blackness. Once our eyes had become adjusted to the darkness, all we could see was the white foam of the bow wave.

***Fox Bay Raid Fire Plan***


ZJ 1069 Fuel Dump (Stip RH Point)
creep N. VT Low in Effect
ZJ 1066 ARTY (L&R) LH beyond jetty.
ZJ 1068 AA near (LH)
ZJ 1067 Tents gully (LH) VT (High)
ZJ 1074 BECH hotted(?) LH FAR VT
ZJ 1071 AA (RH Hill) Spread, fire DSC LF 500
ZJ 1070 Centre Trench RH
FIRE PLAN
ZJ 1072 Runway Centre (RH) 45 HA/7257 3 H45B

*The Fire plan for the Fox Bay Raid. Target numbers, brief description and method of fire required in the order I thought likely. The ship's and all ourcall signs for that night are on the bottom. Both this document and the next one were placed in a waterproof envelope and, with my unmarked map, were the only documents carried on the Fox Bay Raid. The envelope was handy; ready to be thrown into the sea had capture seemed likely.*




*Four nights' worth of ships' and our call signs and radio frequencies, crudely jumbled up to confuse a captor. We might well have been forced to stay for several nights, had our luck failed.*

This sort of waiting feels very lonely. No more planning, nothing to say and only the job to get on with. The odd whispered joke and then a tap on the arm to move up to the boat and get in. Everyone checked their rifle safety catches were on then cocked, pulling back the slide, carefully feeding a round into the breech. Anyone who had completely dismantled their weapon fired off a round or two into the blackness to check that all was well, and we clambered into the RIB.

The ship suddenly slowed, wallowing as her engines went into reverse. The RIB was winched down into the darkness, and as we touched the now very choppy sea, Peter Beavers started the engine. He'd spent time checking then running it in a water tank, so it was warm and fired up immediately. We turned onto a heading toward the now invisible mass of West Head, five miles north of us.

It was 26 May at 0030 hours.

After 30 minutes the weather got much worse, waves breaking over the boat. We were filling with water. The engine was faltering

but kept firing so we pressed on. The bungs started leaking, then the engine decided to stop intermittently. We began bailing.

Eventually West Head loomed out of the darkness, but as sea conditions were so bad, now Force 7 to 8, we forgot our good intentions about using the Chatelaine, which stayed in its case under water at our feet, pressing on without attempting a thermal sweep.

Once we entered the relative shelter of the Bay, the sea wasn't quite so bad. Thick belts of floating kelp[9] stopped us getting close to the shore. But it then clogged up our propeller, being towed along behind our boat like an oversized bridal train. All our night observation devices were rendered useless by the weather, the rain appearing as red spots that obliterated everything else.

I located our landing position, but thick seaweed made it impossible to get even close. A prominent island in the middle of the channel at the mouth of the estuary called Knob Island, looked like the only other place we might land and observe. It also looked like just the place for a standing sentry. So two of our team swam ashore and searched the island, which was only fifty feet high and a hundred feet in diameter, with waist high tussock grass all over. We brought the RIB in close then waded ashore.

Steve and I sat on the top, in between the thick clumps of grass, and I contacted the ship on the radio. But during the soaking-wet trip, the radio's headset terminals had got damp, despite the numerous plastic bags in which it was wrapped, which under more usual sea conditions, keep things dry. We sat there blowing on the terminals, then cannibalised dry connectors from our spare radio. With a hybrid set, we finally established usable communications, the ship reported ready and shells started coming down.

I put some 60 rounds onto the enemy's' main fuel dump (target number ZJ 1069) mixing VT (variable time fuses that make the shells explode 25 or 50 feet above the ground, spreading a hail of shrapnel forwards and downwards) with ground-detonating shells to puncture the cans and start a fire. Unfortunately water in the radio was still making transmissions intermittent, so while waiting for the next shells to be fired, we spent a lot of time blowing on the connections and swapping leads.

The tide was now receding. Although the protection team had been in the water disentangling seaweed from our engine, Pete Beavers decided we should get out into the middle of the bay before the kelp got too thick for us to move.

Our shelling was accurate and several fuel tanks exploded. There was firing from Argie positions, which helped me get my bearings, confirming the information I already had as to their locations. In the blackness, the ground only became visible in the flash as our shells

detonated, or through the nightscope (a small image intensifier). The deep boom of the gun firing out to sea, and the tremendous crash of the 4.5-inch shells exploding close by, echoed across the quiet bay.

As we motored away from Knob Island, the RIB's engine suddenly revved up. Pete Beavers fished around in the water then announced we'd lost the propeller, and it being HMS *Plymouth's* boat, had no spare. He made an ironic announcement:

"You know how I tell you on the SC3 course that the only way home is to paddle? Well, we are in literally just that situation for real. I suggest we get used to the idea of a very long paddle."

So in twos, we began paddling back out to sea where the ship was waiting, about seven miles away. A stiff wind was blowing us onto the shore towards the now very wide-awake Argie force. Our paddling was doing little more than keep us in the same place, and was very hard work. Being slowly blown ashore, I started working out how if we had to land, we could get back round on foot to East Point and our emergency pick-up point.

The battering we'd suffered on the way in had forced out one of the RIB's bungs, so one of the air compartments had collapsed and we were again filling up. The missing bung was underneath the boat, so we couldn't replace it. To avoid sinking, the tempo of our bailing increased quite dramatically.

It was now 0300, and as our cut-off time with *Plymouth* was 0600, it was very important in spite of the excessively watery conditions, to get a radio set going once more. Both my HF and VHF radios were now wet, but by a further cannibalisation of parts we were able to get the VHF set working.

On HMS *Plymouth*, with the worsening weather, they'd lost us on their radar, and now we'd gone quiet – so they were very worried. Brum Richards and the SBS liaison officer told Plymouth's Captain David Pentreath, that what happened next had to be dictated by us, as we knew what was going on – the standard rule when working with Special Forces.

But after 45 minutes further radio silence from us, David Pentreath asked Brum what he thought had happened. Brum told me later that he'd taken the Captain aside, then very privately suggested there were four possibilities:

"They've been captured – which is unlikely without us hearing a fire fight, or any radio SITREPs. Both their radios could be unworkable, due to the bad weather. The enemy could be very close to them so they can't transmit. Or the last rounds we fired, hit them by accident and they're all dead…"

Brum said that on hearing this last option, David Pentreath went as white as a sheet. Brum had to repeat to him that they must wait for

things to develop.

As this conversation was taking place down in the Ops Room, the SBS liason officer was out on the bridge wing listening for any VHF communications. He summoned Brum to listen to a strange new transmission on the SB frequency. Brum recognised my voice and did a remarkable job interpreting my less-than-orthodox fire orders, as reception faded and crackled.

Pete Beavers noted a change of wind away from the Argie positions to WSW. We stopped paddling, made a cruciform out of the paddles and lashed up a poncho as our sail. This blew us sideways but away from the enemy, and with much adjustment plus paddling we started to move back out to sea. Our sail was also visible on the ship's radar.

I was bailing. As we now had communications it seemed profitable to continue the bombardment.

My procedures were minimal: 'Ten salvoes on the far right-hand target', but they worked. I bailed furiously, then after counting the number of seconds from firing, looked at the target as the shells came over. When Steve Hoyland took his turn paddling, he gave the SB guys the briefest imaginable course in NGS signalling:

"Whatever the ship says you repeat back to them verbatim loud enough so I can hear, then whatever I say to you, you repeat back to them word-for-word."

Our shelling was making the Argies extremely agitated. It was therefore very comforting to be moving away from the shore. The anti-aircraft battery to the east of the settlement started firing, so I shelled them and they went permanently quiet.

We were now drifting towards the eastern shore. The cut-off time for *Plymouth* getting back to the safety of the San Carlos air defence umbrella by daybreak was approaching. If she were to be caught by an air attack on her own in Falkland Sound, she'd almost certainly be sunk – as had already happened to HMS *Ardent*.

In a terse series of muttered conversations between paddling, we'd reconciled ourselves to landing among the enemy positions then walking to our Emergency Shore RV. This pre-determined point was about 20 miles up the coast. In a week or so, a helicopter or boat, and SBS rescue team would go there every few days at pre-set times until we were all accounted for.

But our shorter time period 'Evasion RV's' were on the other side of the bay – the west, our having assumed in our planning that we would land on that side. We were therefore not at all happy about our predicament.

The 0600 cut-off time was getting closer. We steered toward the

distant muzzle flashes from *Plymouth's* gun, and transmitted compass bearings to her so she could search for us on the radars.

Water was coming in fast, and our furious bailing was only just keeping it ankle-deep. The GPMG and box with the Chatelaine were submerged underfoot, our radio having become the most important piece of equipment to us. Steve Hoyland sat beside me on the still-inflated port side of the RIB, radio earphones over his right ear and the left free so he could hear what was going on. The radio was on his knees and he hunched protectively over it, partially shielded by me from the waves breaking over the bow. I bailed and shouted the fire-control orders into his free ear, which he transmitted to the ship.

In the bow, two men stood precariously holding Pete Beaver's poncho to the wind, which made the RIB, which did not have a keel, move very sluggishly in a sideways direction. But this was now very definitely taking us away from the enemy positions.

However this kindly change in wind direction was not enough to push us out to sea. So to avoid being blown onto the rocks on the eastern side of the bay, the cruciform of paddles holding up the sail was dismantled and very serious paddling began in deadly earnest.

We alternated between 10-minute intervals of bailing and paddling. Our 'drybag' waterproof suits, the layers of clothing underneath and the heavy, ammunition-filled combat waistcoats worn over the top made paddling very hard. Even so we were very cold, shivering constantly, the cutting wind draining away the body heat our paddling was generating.

HMS *Plymouth* could not come into Fox Bay to pick us up because that would have exposed her to too much risk. They'd detected an enemy *Fledermaus* radar. As there were intelligence reports of shore-based Exocet missiles having been deployed, this radar was causing very great anxiety.

Being a small rubber boat, we did not register on *Plymouth's* radar screens, and were too far away for her to see a light, even if the weather allowed. We continued sending bearings from us to the distant muzzle flashes of her gun. Finally the two Heads loomed large to either side. I sent bearings from us to the Heads, so *Plymouth's* navigator could triangulate our position.

From the shore a thousand metres away, a 30-mm cannon opened up, its tracer looping towards us in the darkness to burst over our heads with bright flashes and loud explosions that echoed round the bay. There was much machine-gun tracer being fired, also in what seemed like our direction.

Our naval gunnery was going very well in spite of everything else, with shells whispering in over our heads and exploding with deep, heartless reports that reverberated around the surrounding hills. The

flashes provided brief frozen silhouettes of the hill slopes and buildings, to be enlivened by 'extra' detonations indicating ammunition and fuel dumps being hit.

At 0600Z there was a sound of a transport aircraft going overhead, making our part of the world seem impossibly busy. Later I was told by the Signals Intelligence spook that this was from Argentina flying an 'air defence expert' to Port Stanley.

0600Z was also the latest time by which we had to be back safely on board *Plymouth* before the Argentine fighter-bombers arrived. She'd just have time to steam flat out to the safety of the anchorage at San Carlo.

But with the cut-off time now elapsed, we'd have to land on the east side of the bay, bury the boat and walk north up the coast to our Emergency Shore Rendezvous. If we didn't turn up, another RV even further away would be visited every week at set times until we were picked up – or until it was proved that we were dead or had been captured.

However, back in HMS *Plymouth* Captain Pentreath made the decision that he was going to stay and pick us up. He announced over the ship's tannoy that we were part of his ship's company and that he was not going to set sail from Fox Bay until we were safely back on board.

Slowly and painfully, we were getting near to the entrance of Fox Bay and the safety of the ocean. We made a frantic burst of paddling to get around East Head to avoid being sucked in by the current and onto the rocks. We then flashed a torch to where *Plymouth* lay, and heard on the radio that at last she'd seen us. She moved into the lee of the East Head and away from the threat of any land based missiles, launching her Gemini to tow us in.

But even with the Gemini towing, our RIB was so heavy with water and the seas so choppy we had to continue paddling. This 20-minute sprint, so close to safety, was particularly exhausting, and it was with relief and some disbelief that we gazed up at the huge rusty sides of the warship as we came alongside. The way to the deck was fifteen feet up a scramble net. Thankfully there were sailors to help, for we were very heavy with being so wet plus our ammunition, spare pistols, loaded combat vests, and assault weapons.

It was a serious effort to jump from the heaving boat onto the net, then clamber over the rail to the deck above. With the weight of our equipment, our inflatable assault lifejackets would not have held us up. In the water we would have sunk like bricks. Falling from the net did not bear thinking about. A sad end…

As we were hauled over the rail and onto the deck by willing

hands, the officer of the watch piped the news of our safe arrival to the rest of the ship. I was touched to hear a spontaneous cheer erupt from the surrounding decks.

Once all were safely aboard and the RIB winched on to the deck, we went into the flight-deck hangar and stripped off our equipment, rubber dry suits and the sodden clothing underneath. From the bags we'd stowed there before we left, we took towels, dry tracksuits, thick, woollen roll-neck sweaters, socks and white plimsolls (the last three items from the excellent Navy survivors' pack given to any sailor unlucky enough to be sunk). Already starting to feel warm again, we trooped below for a hot shower, huge breakfast, pint of beer and a deep sleep on the wardroom floor.

As we did this, *Plymouth* steamed flat out towards San Carlos and gained the safety of the air-defence screen. We were completely knackered.

Captain David Pentreath made a very difficult, brave decision in staying to pick us up, a decision that despite the obvious risks, his ships' company clearly supported, judging from the enthusiasm with which they'd helped us.

But had *Plymouth* been Exoceted from Fox Bay when he brought the ship round the Head to get us, or had *Plymouth* been bombed in Falkland Sound *en route* to the safety of the air-defence screen at San Carlos, his judgement would have been very seriously questioned, and he would have suffered the remorse of being responsible for the deaths and injuries his sailors would have sustained.

David is typical of the rarest and very best sort of Royal Navy officer, who ignore the safe, easy, career-enhancing options, pushing themselves and their men to achieve truly great things – not that rescuing us counts as a 'truly great' achievement even though that's how it will always seem to us. Nobody, least of all us, would have blamed him for pushing off at 0600 as planned. It took enormous, bloody-minded determination to ignore all the sensible reasons for doing that, to remain and pick us up.

There's no doubt that we were pushing our luck with such a heavily loaded boat in such poor sea conditions. Afterwards, Pete Beavers said if this had been an exercise he was running in Poole with the full peacetime safety back-up, he would have called it off simply because of the bad weather. But because everyone did their best and were well prepared, it came off.

And when the results came through via GCHQ, all our efforts were proved to have been very worthwhile indeed.

Part of my debriefing process was with the Force's top-secret

signals Intelligence Office, manned by spooks from GCHQ, who were able to gather information from Argentine military radio transmissions. Argentine military reports back to Buenos Aires revealed we'd done quite a bit of damage to the fuel dump and ammunition storage sites. Three officers had been killed, they didn't bother with the numbers of ordinary soldiers killed or wounded.

During the questioning of prisoners at the end of the campaign, it was also discovered that the Commanding Officer of the Fox Bay battalion shot himself on the night of our bombardment. Had he known the problems we were having so very close to his own trenches, he might not have taken it so badly… Tragic perhaps, but our sense of black-tinged sense of humour saw only the irony.

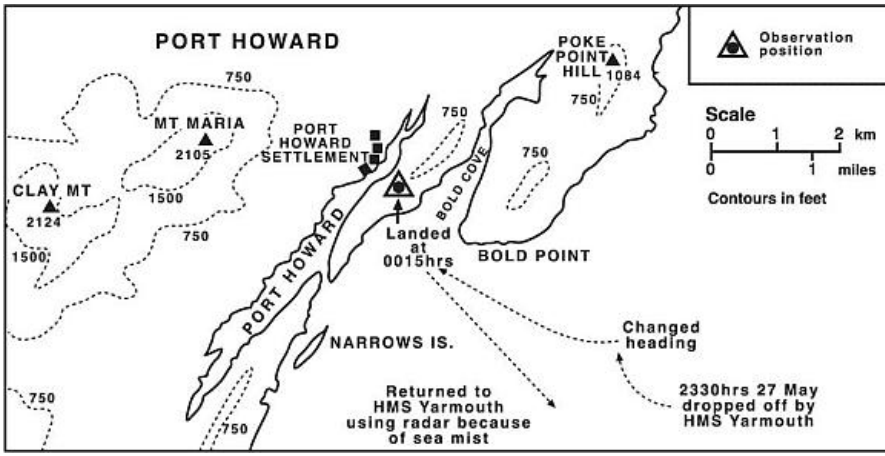
We made it back on to *Intrepid* later that day (26 May). I heaved all my kit from the flight deck and up through the usual hatches and ladders once more to the wardroom flat, this time without the risk of incineration by Sea Cat. After a coffee, or more likely it was a beer, I went up to the Amphibious Operations Room to collect any signals that might have come in for me, and to see how the war was going.

Meanwhile Nick Allin (the other half of FO1) was planning a raid similar to Fox Bay but on Port Howard, the settlement to the north. I'd lost track of them once their planning got under way and I went off to Fox Bay, they having been initially warned off for the operation on 23 May, at the same time as me.

After the excitement of our adventure, Sergeant Pete York of 8 SBS, who was in charge of Nick's insertion, had decided to take two boats, and rather than relying on anyone else's craft, despite the logistic complication of boating across to *Yarmouth*, to use two SBS Gemini assault boats. Their original intention was to go in and stay ashore for five days, but eventually simplicity overcame the complexities of the longer operation, and as I had done they decided on a similar one-night operation.

Nick delayed 24 hours in order to debrief an SAS patrol that was returning after several weeks hiding in the area of Port Howard. They then transferred from *Intrepid* to HMS *Yarmouth*. The full team was Nick Allin, Des Nixon, Pete York and five SBS Marines: two coxswains, plus three others in case they had to fight their way out.

***Port Howard Raid Map***




At this point I'll let Nick tell it in his own words:

On HMS *Yarmouth*, we sailed late from Bomb Alley at about 2100 hours (on 27 May) due to air attacks from enemy aircraft. We arrived at our drop-off point, which was 3½ kilometres south-west of Bold Point at about 2330. In total darkness we launched the two Geminis and made our way to the east of Bold Point, scanning the area with the thermal imager and with the image intensifiers to check for the enemy – nothing was sighted.

From there we took a bearing north-east to get our landing place, which was a little sheltered rock cove on the seaward side, all the time checking for enemy movement. We landed at 0015, secured the area and gave a radio check to the ship and were 'fives' both ways.

Then we made our way to our pre-arranged observation position taking great care walking up the hill to that location. We sent the machine-gun team to cover the northeast and we covered the southwest. I established comms with *Yarmouth* and informed them that we were ready. After a short delay due to the ship turning around, at 0130 we started engaging targets from our prearranged fire-plan that I had given to Sergeant-Major Richards, our liaison officer on the ship.

The first target was some tent positions and troops dug into trenches. We then shifted the shellfire onto an anti-aircraft position and store. The last target was the enemy headquarters. While firing again at the first target we came under fire from a gun battery. Its fire after a bit became quite indiscriminate, going over our heads, possibly aiming at the ship. Low-lying mist in the Port Howard area made visibility bad.

Nick was still firing at another target when the team came under artillery shellfire. Des Nixon had seen flashes earlier on, and when the mist closed in, had plotted the location. Des was able to produce the co-ordinates of where the gun battery was hidden:

> This gun battery was about 1,000 metres southwest of the enemy Headquarters. I gave a correction from that, and the shells landed a bit short. Once the shells were falling in the target area I covered all along the ridge because the guns were spread out across about 500 metres. Using VT and covering the area very comprehensively we heard nothing more from the guns. We fired about 297 salvoes altogether, which covered the target area.
>
> We left the observation point and made our way back to the Geminis very carefully, just in case. We started the engines and headed back out to sea to the ship – on a compass heading as the mist had become very bad. We had to get on the radio and use the ship's radar to guide us the last bit.
>
> On our return we had a debrief and sorted out a few problems. Afterwards we had a good breakfast and got our heads down.
>
> The radio intercept messages that we saw when we got back to *Intrepid* said that there were two officers dead, two wounded, with two houses and a storeroom damaged.

With a heavy sea mist, the weather was quite calm in comparison with the two nights earlier at Fox Bay. Nick's operation was a textbook version of what I had been trying to achieve at Fox Bay, and could not have gone better.

# Chapter 9. Survival

Before joining the Army, I'd assumed modern technology would have improved the soldier's lot. Apocalyptic First World War scenes of mud, water and cold in the trenches, men soaking wet for weeks on end in the Crimea, and epic paintings of armies of men huddled in cloaks trying to sleep on open ground the night before a battle. This was historical – these privations were things of the past… surely?

When I arrived at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in 1971, naïve and young, I'd been surprised to be taught to dig trenches. Surely modern warfare had progressed beyond that? They had to be deep enough to stand with just your head over the parapet, two feet wide and two metres long, plus an underground space for one person to sleep under the claustrophobic protection of two feet of earth overhead. We were 'taught' to de-turf a huge area then dig fast, spreading the excavation spoil, then turfing and camouflaging to blend with the rest of the hillside. With night patrols to test our navigation, endurance and leadership, and to develop our capacity to go without sleep, we lived for weeks (I cannot say happily) in these soggy, muddy holes.

Trenches remain the only (and cheapest) protection from shell and mortar fire, one of the peculiar and inescapable norms (the lowest common denominator perhaps) of military life. Someone else has summed up Sandhurst exercises, I think very accurately, as "The endless march to the undug trench…."

The chapter following this one describes Operation Brewers Arms, which became, apart from anything else, an exercise in survival. We had to vanish by day into gently rolling, bare-arsed moorland, which was completely waterlogged. So before I proceed with that, I'd like to explain how you live when soaking wet, freezing cold, unable to move in daylight, with very little food. Indeed, this is the backdrop to everything in this book.

These aspects of war cannot be altered by technology – which is why, ultimately, it is the quality of soldiers that decides the outcome, rather than numbers or the sophistication of their equipment.

Eating, next to being dry and clean, and sleeping, was the most enjoyable and so personally important activity. Because eating is 'normal', for us there was an element of escapism in it.

On the ships you could get two hot meals on most days throughout the fighting. These meals, breakfast and dinner, were served during the hours of darkness when the air raids were not coming in, and were fairly normal, even though tinned or dehydrated.

Because of the danger of fire from hot ovens and chip pans there was no cooking during the day, when we lived off 'action snacks', e.g. hamburgers, hot dogs, cheese rolls… washed down with countless cups of hot, sweet tea and coffee from urns that did the rounds every hour or so. This, however, was sheer luxury compared to what we ate out on operations.

The British Army 24-hour ration pack of the 1980s, known as a 'rat' pack, was coveted by our compatriots in foreign armies, who would happily swap the most delightful delicacies from their own rations for a packet of 'Biscuits Sweet' or a small tin of 'Bacon Grill'. This astonished the British soldier, who avidly collects the strange things that other armies eat. After a while, however, one realized that their food was actually nothing like as good as ours. The Americans ate a strange mixture of cocktail snacks and kiddy food, the Danes changed their menus every few months, and the Dutch simply provided too much which you then had to carry.

In 1982, the Brit 24-hour 'rat' pack came in a plain, unmarked, brown cardboard box containing Breakfast and a Main Meal, plus several packets of bland, heavy, dry biscuits (Biscuits AB) and Garibaldi biscuits (Biscuits Sweet AB). Biscuits AB were very carefully formulated to contain oils, carbohydrates and much other vital nourishment. They also clogged up your lower intestine. There were several brew kits providing tea, coffee, powdered milk and sugar enough for a couple of pints of 'wets'. These were shared around several people, sharing the same mug. There was a 'sundries' pack containing a generous supply of hard lavatory paper, chewing gum (as an aid to tooth cleaning), salt sachets, a small tin opener, a book of matches and a list of the menus provided by the four types of pack.

Each brown box was labelled Menu A, B, C or D. We knew exactly what each menu contained, and which we preferred to reject, swap or dump. Breakfast consisted of Biscuits AB, a tin of Bacon Grill or Bacon Burger, tins of Baked Beans or Spaghetti and a block of Compressed Oatmeal. The main meals ranged from miniature steak and kidney puddings (nicknamed 'Babies Heads') to stewed steak, minced beef and chicken curry. The tins were half the size of the normal ones you buy in the shops. Dehydrated apple flakes or apricot flakes were included in the main meal, and a tin of fruit pudding (a heavy plum duff) or the universal favourite, fruit salad.

Fruit salads were the ultimate treat which people would hoard until they needed cheering up. I very often returned from ops with several fruit salads because I hadn't been able to decide when to eat them. Des Nixon had a similar problem but he, with the inescapable logic of a Yorkshireman, overcame it by eating all his at once at the very beginning, which was far more sensible than my strategy. I heard

of one person who ate all his fruit salads before even leaving the ship.

It's possible to create 'interesting' dishes from a 24hr 'rat' pack, although when once I tried this at home in a proper kitchen, the results were bland and not very nice. But out in the field, fresh air and hunger make 'compo' rations seem much nicer than they actually are. In more leisurely times, on long training exercises, I've created such delights as apple crumble, and curries using spices, garlic and fresh onions, but in the Falklands we stuck to the classic British Army 'all-in' stew if we were in a position to heat our food. Otherwise we ate it cold.

Cooking is done in small cooking pots or issue mess tins, and everyone has their own methods, utensils and preferences. I liked to cook mine in a circular aluminium dixie with a lid, using a shortened wooden spoon. The wooden spoon is an essential bit of kit as far as I'm concerned, a cooking and eating implement combined, can scrape burnt stew from the bottom of the dixie without added aluminium, but most importantly doesn't get hot and burn your fingers or lips (which may also be chapped or wind-burned). I used the same dixie for making brews, which cleans it, saving water. Again to avoid burning sensitive lips, I drank from a pint-size, dark-green plastic mug. This mug suffered a melt-down during the last fortnight of the fighting by being left too close to a hexamine cooker. But thankfully I was able to re-melt it with my heated-up knife, then smooth hot plastic over the hole. It's not easy to obtain green plastic mugs in the South Atlantic.

On exercises, most of us used 'bluey' propane gas cookers for their speed of cooking and lightness. But in the cold and high winds of the Falklands, they were simply not hot enough. The issue hexamine tablets (like firelighter blocks) with a metal cooker frame, issued one per ration pack, are very hot, and with appropriate shelter from the wind, worked very well. The main problem was getting the 'hexxy' blocks alight in howling winds. The 'Rolls Royce' of cookers was a Coleman's petrol stove, but you had to scavenge round the ship for suitable fuel. Avgas as used by helicopters was a dodgy alternative.

The best 'rats' of all are the ones designed for the arctic, which provide 5000 calories per day if you eat everything, with very adaptable but mainly dehydrated menus. Everyone's favourite, apart from the fruit salad, was arctic ration hot chocolate – a meal in itself.

The main problem with dehydrated rations is that you rarely have time to soak them for long enough – assuming you have enough water. Improperly soaked, arctic rations were crunchy, which was fine, but then soaked up water from your stomach to make you dehydrated, plus even more constipated than the usual clogging-up effect of compo. Even in the excessively wet conditions of the

Falklands, there was often a shortage of pure enough water that was safe to consume. Quite often, as we couldn't roam around looking for streams, finding even a muddy pool in which carefully to immerse your water bottle was a problem. Chlorine water purifying tablets were always used, making everything taste like swimming pool water.

The cold, wet, windy conditions made dehydration a particular problem. Wind evaporates moisture from the skin very quickly, especially when moving and perspiring heavily. This causes rapid dehydration, making you vulnerable to exposure.

Whenever we could, we cooked just before last light and drank lots of wets to keep body fluids up. But drinking lots after a meal, then trying to sleep creates problems of its own. Getting up in the night for a pee is a serious business when you have to crawl over the top of your 'oppo' underneath a two-foot high poncho that's stretched tight with accumulated rainwater, and a camouflage net piled with turfs and grass. You then have to negotiate a muddy tunnel to the outside world. Many of us used the 'pee bottle in the sleeping bag' technique, which doubles up as a very welcome hot water bottle. The bottle had to be very large, to minimise the risk of miscalculation and disastrous overflow.

The long days spent lying-up waiting for nightfall, or in concealed observation posts on mountaintops, were bone-numbingly cold. We could not move at all, and certainly not in order to generate body heat. We'd wear all our clothes plus arctic quilted 'Chairman Mao' outer suits, then if the security situation allowed it, crawl inside our 'green slugs' and huddle together for warmth. Eating a chocolate bar seemed to release an almost instant glow of energy and perceptible warmth, and the value of a hot, very sweet cup of tea was unfathomable. We tended to keep bars of chocolate for after dark when we dared not light the cookers.

The meals we produced under these conditions tasted marvellous even though in reality they were monotonously similar. The best quick, hot meal was the 'all-in'stew, in which everything from stewed steak and powdered mulligatawny soup, to the apple flakes and mixed fruit pudding was mixed together. You stirred in your salt, oxo-cubes and broken biscuits, and afterwards had a nice cup of tea. (Amateurs heat each tin in hot water to avoid cleaning their mess tins.) Crumbled-up Biscuits AB thickens it all up to the required stew consistency.

Of course sometimes we daren't risk showing even the slight light of a hexamine flame, and so couldn't cook at all. The lunch or snack meal was all right cold, but best with a brew, chocolate and sweets with biscuits and a tin of meat paste. But the dehydrated stuff wasn't worth eating if made with cold water – too chewy, plus the

constipation…

But the cold froze everything. So you had to remember to transfer your chocolate and Mars bars, tins of fruit salad and meat paste to an inside pocket to thaw before eating. Frozen Rollos, part of the snack meal, were like biting pieces of metal. People lost fillings and broke teeth eating them. Metal water bottles would split, so we used the thick plastic alternatives.

Because compo rations clog up the digestive system, you're supposed to eat fresh rations one day in every five when eating the stuff continuously. But constipation wasn't a disadvantage, as we were understandably unwilling to attend to the call of nature on a daily basis – if at all – due to the cold. Wearing several layers of clothing, undoing all the buttons with numbed fingers exposed one's tender parts to the biting winds for far too long. Our trousers were double thickness material, usually wet and so very heavy; pockets filled with spare rifle magazines, first-aid dressings and maps. Many of us wore braces rather than belts which could cause unpleasant sores. Braces required even more undressing. In short, everything encouraged the postponement of the evil 'shovel' moment, further constipating an already unhappy system.

Expeditions at night with a shovel were therefore quite a performance. First you had to get your 'oppo' to come along as sentry, inform the rest of the team of your task and the direction you were going out with your weapons and a shovel. The sentry studiously watched the arcs while you fumbled with your trousers in the teeth of cutting sleety wind. In the darkness and urgency of the moment, it's vital to know exactly where you've placed your weapon. These expeditions were normally additionally fraught due to their having been delayed longer than sensible.

Shovel patrols were however an animated source of conversation afterwards, recounted in detail and with great satisfaction. Because like eating, they were a natural activity and had a degree of escapism about them.

A perfectly acceptable opening gambit to a conversation, even with a stranger, was to say: "I had a really fantastic shit last night." There was also another particularly important element to this very strange business – that of relief after the event: a catharsis, something that you'd endured and survived, heroic and allegorical to which everybody could relate. And most important of all, it was something personal, an event unconnected with anything military.

Choosing the right clothing for cold, wet conditions is very hard to get right. When wearing full waterproofs, perspiration builds up on the inside as you move, and you end up soaked from the inside

outwards. I found Goretex equipment, designed to let perspiration out but not let rain in, worked up to a point, especially the 'bivvie' bags in which you could sleep without bothering with a poncho or any overhead shelter.

The Falklands weather was very dangerous. The frequent sudden drops in temperature to well below freezing, plus strong winds, created a wind-chill factor that lowered the effective temperature still further. When it's raining, the temperature is (obviously) above zero, and we often ended up wet through. Then the temperature would suddenly drop below freezing, and in the usually strong winds, we'd be classic candidates for exposure (hypothermia). But we'd survived all this on countless exercises in Norway, where exactly these conditions occur towards the end of winter as the temperatures hover around zero.

The 'layer principle' of clothing, tried and tested in the arctic, is essential. You wear many thin layers rather than a few thick ones, to trap as much warm air next to the body as possible. I wore a Liefer thermal vest with a string vest over that and string underpants, then a Norwegian army shirt made of pile cotton with a zip-up roll-neck. My DPM camouflage trousers were double-thickness and windproof, held up with braces because with the pockets filled and soaking wet they became very heavy, and a belt chafed my waist. Over the Norge shirt I wore a jungle DPM shirt, made of high-grade close-weave cotton. Its many pockets were filled with food, first-field dressings, ammunition, a packet of loo paper, notebook, chinagraph pens and pencils. An arctic windproof DPM smock went over that.

If we were moving I could undo all the buttons on the DPM shirt and unzip the Norge shirt and smock to ventilate. The pockets of the smock were also crammed with food, ammo and first-aid kit – the smock on its own weighing over 20 pounds.

When we stopped moving, I'd zip everything up, then put on the jacket of my Chairman Mao suit, usually over the top of everything else. In an OP, I wore every piece of clothing I had: Chairman Mao suit on top, then windproofs and waterproofs over the top of that. I wore a woolly mountaineering hat, plus a black balaclava at night, and a green arctic 'headover' round my neck.

Wet feet were the great enemy, but could not be avoided. In spite of the military common sense of wearing boots at all times, even when sleeping in case you are attacked, we often removed boots and socks, applying foot powder and wearing our carefully conserved set of dry socks. When we were lucky enough to get into our sleeping bags, we'd also swap boots for arctic-issue quilted bootees. This was a very important ritual, allowing our feet to recover a little by being dry and warm for a few hours in every 24.

It often took some time massaging, rubbing and tending to get the circulation going again. But this constant, daily effort did keep trench foot, frostbite and other foot problems at bay.

Later in the campaign we acquired Swedish Army ski-march boots, which kept the water completely out. With British issue white-pile arctic socks worn under a pair of the normal khaki socks, the foot problem was pretty much solved – provided you powdered and massaged your feet each day. Wet socks could be dried to an acceptable dampness by hanging them over your shoulders under your smock as you walked, like a mobile clotheshorse.

With the extreme wetness of the weather and water-logged ground, we had to preserve every bit of our dry clothing jealously, and move terribly carefully. Getting wet was a serious problem, almost as bad as an injury. One SAS captain nearly died of exposure after getting wet while in an OP. He'd tried to dry his clothes and get warm by taking the risk of lighting a fire in a cave, but soon had to be evacuated.

We'd lie out in the driving rain, huddled under poncho shelters that were taut as bow strings from the weight of rainwater, praying they wouldn't leak or collapse. The poncho slipping in the middle of the night, causing a deluge of water to cascade into the basha would be a potentially fatal disaster.

Organising your kit was paramount. You had to be able to put your hand immediately on any particular bit of equipment. Thus you had to know exactly where in your pockets, webbing or bergen you kept everything. You also had to know where your 'oppo' kept all his bits and pieces, in order to make him a cup of tea or more importantly find his first-aid pack if he was hit. That's not as difficult as it sounds, as certain things are kept by everyone in the same places, i.e. first field dressings in a pocket over the heart (the left-hand side) or spare magazines in the left-hand pouch, so you can hold your weapon with your right hand and get a fresh magazine out with the left.

A soldier's time is spent struggling more with the elements than with the enemy. In surviving a hostile environment you have to work out a way of living and a routine for everything, so that the uncomfortable circumstances don't take over and leave you unable to do your job. You have to be pretty stoical, and a good, unshakeable sense of humour is by far the most important thing to possess.

Operation Brewers Arms, our next task, could easily have been specially devised as a test of these qualities.

# Chapter 10. Operation Brewers Arms

Steve Hoyland and I returned from Fox Bay on 26 May, to *Intrepid* absolutely knackered. However, on arrival we were summoned to the Wardroom to see Jonathan Thomson, who had his roll of maps laid out on the long, polished, dining-room table. He outlined a plan involving us going straight out again – immediately. "Our hearts died within us" (as a Pacific island native said in one of my boyhood books after the District Officer tried to make them play cricket).

There was a theory that an Argentine Special Forces team with radios was directing the Argie air raids from somewhere in the Mount Rosalie area. Being just across Falkland Sound to the west, Mount Rosalie overlooked the entrance to San Carlos Water. We were to boat across there, land, find them (with help from our TI) and either shell them, capture them or otherwise deal with them.[10]

It was to have happened five minutes ago, and was a good example of how the Brigade Staff conceived what they thought a good idea, told us to do it, then thought no more about it except to chide us for not having done it. I realised that if we were to avoid being given impossible tasks that would sooner rather than later lead to a disaster, I was going to have to question closely everything I was told to do.

There were several problems with this particular idea, apart from my reluctance to rush off into something without proper preparation. We did not know how many enemy might be in the Mount Rosalie area, plus we *did* know that a long-term SAS patrol that had been there for several weeks. But they'd stopped communicating… Thus we couldn't open fire on anybody without taking the additional risk of getting close enough to be totally sure who they were – within small arms range…. Our presence in the area would be unknown to the SAS patrol, which if they saw us first would open fire and ask questions later.

Nevertheless in record time, we were ready to stay out for a week. But after several hours getting cold and wet in the LCM taking us to *Fearless*, including the doubtful entertainment value of watching an air raid from the middle of San Carlos Water, it grew dark and the Mount Rosalie operation was postponed. We were left marooned on *Fearless*, which was grossly overcrowded, and had to sleep among the diesel fumes of the tank deck.

A little of our frustration comes through in a letter I wrote home from *Intrepid* at this time (two days after the Fox Bay raid), whilst waiting and worrying about Nick and Des at Port Howard.

Things are somewhat trying at present – mainly because

nothing is definite and everything keeps changing all the time. It is quite a relief, in a funny sort of way, to get on with a job!

It's hard to visualise 'normal' life at present, although I suspect this is a natural defence mechanism. It seems to filter out all the unpleasant bits. I've just had a phone call from Tim Bedford – one of my hands – who has been given a very expensive bit of night observation equipment and wants to know who should 'sign for it'. I paused then said:

"Listen, Tim, you sign for it, and if we lose it I'll write it off."

He just chuckled at the other end, so I said:

"This is war you know. It doesn't really matter."

Some people overheard this and also burst out laughing, so did I. What a ridiculous thing to say.

But we have no real worries out here – like mortgage repayments or trades-union disputes. Our funny little world starts in the morning and ends whenever bed is once again possible. Constant and unremitting chaos presents more of an intellectual challenge than most would realise, but provided you don't allow frustration and a sense of helplessness to get too strong a hold, you can always (a) Carry on as you see fit regardless (b) Obey the last order or (c) Do absolutely nothing. Any one of the three seems to work!

I referred to my younger brother Peter, a lieutenant in the parachute engineers, also in the Falklands.

Typical of Pete to get on to *QE2* rather than the tramp ship that I came down on. I went on *Canberra* for a few nights at Ascension and it was really strange. They were all drinking exotic cocktails and there were stewardesses and all the normal cruise trappings, interspersed with phalanxes of troops running round the promenade decks and duty sergeants in fiercely pressed denim uniforms.

We're just reading the detailed Army Pay Review document – I think I get £2 extra per day, £1.70 Special Forces pay, plus a massive 50p for the privilege of being here! Except they will dream up some reason to take some of it away, i.e. because we are enjoying ourselves too much or something!

Well, I hope all goes well and that our bloodthirsty press and TV are not continuing to exaggerate things as they have done so far. Some of the stuff I've seen in our out-of-date

papers is truly horrifying. It's not at all like that here. It really is infuriating the rubbish they write and print in order to sell copies! Don't worry too much about us (there aren't any cars to get run over by).

The next day, having survived a very noisy and fumy night on *Fearless*'s tank-deck, we got back to *Intrepid* to hear that a TI-scan flight in a Wessex had shown up nothing on Mount Rosalie. There was no air raiding in San Carlos either. But the Mount Rosalie operation was still on.

At sea, *Super Etendards* attacked the fleet, and an Exocet destroyed *Atlantic Conveyor*. A second helicopter TI scan still showed no enemy on Mount Rosalie, but nevertheless we spent another day rushing around preparing to go up there to take out the mysterious forward air controller.

In all this, we still had no idea what the SAS patrol were doing. It seemed despite the more-than-religious necessity of Special Forces *always* making daily radio comms checks, they were not communicating at all – perhaps waiting until they had important information. But admitting that their patrol was *incommunicado* took some time for the SAS headquarters to do.

So I declared that until radio contact was re-established with the patrol, this was too dodgy a mission to be worth the risk, and refused to go. Losing our FO team – or the SAS patrol in a firefight – on an apparently empty mountain, wasn't sensible. There were only five FO teams, all constantly doing operations. Of the two, we were certainly the more valuable…

Communications with the SAS team were never achieved, so the idea was finally shelved, for us at least. The Mount Rosalie op did recur a few times for others, and at one stage Chris Brown did take a patrol out. But on searching the area, whoever might have been there was long gone.

So thus ended two days of that most classic of military activities – being buggered about. It had started immediately on our return cold, wet and knackered from Fox Bay, being given just ten minutes to get completely ready for a two-day operation – which we'd achieved…

At the same time as our private adventures, there were plans afoot to dump all Special Forces ashore complete with our various mountains of equipment, in order to clear HMS *Intrepid* for 5 Infantry Brigade's arrival from the UK.

This wonderful Brigade Staff idea was *the* quintessential total logistic nightmare. The detailed planning and mounting of special operations cannot be done adequately from slit trenches in the

pouring rain.

The FO1 solution to this last problem was to pack our gear into waterproof bags and arrange it in the sort of order in which we thought we might need it. This however was actually impossible, as we had no idea what ops might be planned.

But in the end this dilemma was pre-empted by the SBS planning ops that would get us off the ships and into the field for as long as possible. 3 Commando Brigade would soon be breaking out of the beachhead, with us pushing forward in front.

Outside of my little world and its problems, other people were extremely busy. 2 Para were still fighting at Darwin and Goose Green, 45 Commando were getting towards the end of their long yomp to Douglas, and 3 Para were going very fast towards Teal Inlet Settlement.

The future plan was for 3 Commando Brigade to move to Teal. Already an SBS team had completed their beach recces and were moving back westwards to meet 3 Para and either guide them in, or tell them where the enemy were so a battalion attack could be made.

The SBS were very busy too. My friend from Oxford University Lieutenant David Heaver was getting ready to move his complete troop in Rigid Raiders to Green Island at the southern head of Salvador Waters, to prepare for a move of the entire 3 Commando Brigade eastwards. David's operation deep into the northern flank was a master class in covert boat work and navigation, achieved without detection, moving through very tricky waters at night.

Another SBS troop were warned to start the lengthy preparations for mounting attacks on Argentine shipping in Port Stanley harbour. This is a more traditional SBS task, involving a drop-off from ship, submarine or canoe, a long, approach surface swim by compass, then an underwater compass swim to place limpet mines on the hull of the target ship. This is done at night and requires very great diving skill and tremendous stamina, as well as precise navigation and single-minded courage.

***Operation Brewers Arms Map***

FO1 were to go with Lieutenant Andy Ebbens and his troop of three four-man recce teams and a small HQ, for a minimum of ten days, in which we would infiltrate the Mount Brisbane area north of Stanley, and clear it south to Berkeley Sound. Once done, the way would be clear for crossing the water and getting on to the high ground immediately north of Stanley. This was to be called Operation

Brewers Arms.

The crazy idea of putting all our stores ashore was still hanging over our heads like an unthinkable nightmare. In the end, the orders actually to do it were ignored, because it was just too difficult. We had tons of fragile gear, plus a huge pile of different types of ammunition. The gear alone less ammo was 130 pallet loads. Without being on the ship, our casualty evacuation and radio communications problems would have been insurmountable.

We had to have a secure base from which to plan, monitor operations and recover to afterwards, not to mention preparing for the next mission. And so we made a firm decision to ignore the problem and disregard the order, then 'Lo and Behold', nothing happened and the problem went away.

On shore there was great activity, much shifting of kit, trench digging and confusion. The Argie Air Force managed to put a bomb into the BMA (the Brigade Maintenance Area) killing four and injuring others. Another bomb went into the meat-packing factory being used as the MDS (the Main Dressing Station hospital), which thankfully failed to go off. The surgeons continued operating and the bomb-disposal officer set up his sleeping-bag next to it, to boost the morale of those who doubted him when he declared it safe.

Once we'd been warned for Operation Brewers Arms (so named after Andy Ebben's favourite pub in Poole, and ignoring the MoD rule of using the next deeply-boring name on their random names list[11]) the mucking about stopped. We were even able to go ashore for a congenial range shooting day, zero'ing our weapons.

We left *Intrepid* by LCM early on a beautiful, sunny morning, although very cold. As we motored through the calm waters of San Carlos, the coxswain received an air-raid warning over his radio. We cocked our weapons and angled them 45 degrees upwards against the side of the landing-craft and watched the horizon. Yet again Argie jets screamed in over the hillsides, skimming the water, desperately dodging the missiles and gunfire from the ships.

The helicopters, busy ferrying supplies ashore, took emergency cover in valleys and re-entrants around the anchorage, sitting tucked into the folds in the ground as far as they could go with engine and rotors 'burning and turning'. Our coxswain, who by this stage had spent several days running from ship to shore during air raids, grinned at us and steered even closer to the shore than before. This time we did not manage to 'bag' anything.

We landed at the rickety-looking jetty at San Carlos Settlement, which was a hive of rain-soaked preparation. Lines of troops with rifles and submachine-guns slung over their shoulders, were carrying rolls of barbed wire up the very muddy farm tracks that ran between

the weatherboard farmhouses. Others carried filled sandbags to trench positions under construction everywhere. Near the water's edge a series of elaborate entrenchments with sandbagged roofs and galvanised-iron sides bristled with GPMGs.

We waded through thick mud past tractor sheds and the low palisade fences of the corrugated-iron-roofed houses. Tractors with trailers piled high with barbed wire, metal picket stakes and cheerful muddy soldiers hanging on to the sides, moved busily to and fro in the mire.

Behind the settlement the hillsides were dotted with soldiers, stripped to their vests and shirts, digging like navvies into the peat; familiar faces, begrimed and sweaty. They'd spent their first day ashore being moved from one defensive position to another, having to dig in afresh each time. Their bergens, left on the ships during the initial landings, had failed to reach them and they'd spent several very cold nights out without sleeping-bags or shelter. It was hardly surprising everyone was keen to get on with the war.

I spoke to some of the Falkland Islanders, shy people with an old-fashioned look to them, whose reticence reminded me of Mennonites I'd met in Belize. They'd been delighted but not surprised at the landing, and were quite sure they'd soon be able to shop again in Stanley. One chap said he hardly ever went there, but would make a point of visiting when it was all over.

After announcing our presence to the HQ of 3 Para, who were ensconced with their radio-sets in an outhouse of one of the farms, we were shown a small valley near the water's edge where we could fire our weapons.

It's essential to 'zero' a weapon, adjusting the sights so that what you see through the aperture when you pull the trigger is what you hit. It had not been possible to do this accurately on the ship, and even a small knock can upset the adjustment. The high-velocity Armalites that most of us carried are not really so critical, but the snipers, with their heavy, wooden-stocked rifles and telescopic sights, needed to spend some time on this task. The process of firing then adjusting (using a fine screwdriver) was repeated until perfect. We gathered up the spent brass, then each sniper carefully put his weapon back into its wooden case and we left.

On the way back down to the jetty I bumped into a cheerfully familiar figure. Captain Rod Jenkins of 29 Commando Regiment who, prompted by inquiries as to his health, regaled me with the story of how he'd gone out with shovel and rifle to attend a call of nature, but while so engaged had heard strange noises, and finished up by capturing a stray Argentinean officer. He confessed that this had not been achieved without a little mutual embarrassment. It was a day out

for us, with beautiful, sunny weather and a couple of carefree hours on the range.

Returning to *Intrepid* in the LCM, the wind suddenly got up and waves broke over the bow, drenching us. Soaking wet, I went from the fume-laden darkness of the dock to the AOR to check out what was going on.

Up in the nerve-centre of the ship, just below the bridge, the gaunt steel bulkheads of 'senior officer territory' are poshed-up with polished oak handrails and brass fittings. The narrow passage to the AOR, normally 'bumpered' to shine like glass, was littered with hooded sailors lying on the floor at their action station, drinking tea and reading books or dog-eared old newspapers. With apologies, I stepped over them and entered the AOR.

The map display showed chinagraph arrows of 2 Para's attack on Darwin and Goose Green, which had started the night before. The radios were blasting out crackles and sometimes unintelligible transmissions, to which everyone was riveted. The Paras were under Argie artillery and mortar fire. Since dawn, on green, open moorland, they'd been tied down by the enemy's longer range medium machine-guns.

When I asked what was happening, somebody tersely replied, "We're losing the war."

The land operation was slipping into potential disaster. Every day *Canberra* escaped being sunk by what seemed a string of miracles. The attack on Darwin was the first test of our enemy, which we had to win in order to 'encourage' the rest to surrender when the time was ripe. A failure by the Paras, our 'mailed fist', some twenty miles south, would be catastrophic.

Then came the message "Sunray down", indicating that the Paras' CO, Colonel 'H' Jones, had been killed. The Staff carried on with their work, the atmosphere in the AOR stuffy, tired and sombre. I sat in the corner for a while, making muddy puddles on the linoleum.

But then something extraordinary started happening, to the south of our anchorage. Jones' death – and perhaps the fear of failure – seemed to galvanise the battalion. 2 Para's highly-experienced company commanders and their second-in-command Chris Keeble summoned up the formidable fighting power of their soldiers, then, with a relentless momentum, rolled up the Argentine defensive positions to close on the settlement.

Before last light, 148 Battery's Captain Kevin Arnold, the calm, reflective boss of FO5, directed an air strike of three Harriers onto the eastern end of the Goose Green Peninsula. This was a deliberate, very threatening demonstration of fire-power directed at anti-aircraft

cannon and gun positions. FO5 spent an exposed, uneasy and very cold night amid smouldering gorse grass.

Early the next day (29 May), the enemy asked for a formal surrender, at which they demanded an officer of equivalent rank to their commander attend a formal parade. Their insistence on a formal parade seemed bizarre and ludicrous. Nick Allin said a lance-bombardier would probably suffice.

The importance of this victory cannot be over-stated. If the Paras had taken a hammering with heavy casualties, or even needed to be reinforced to take their objectives, our morale – mine certainly – would have suffered a very severe blow. We believed that the enemy's morale would have received a reciprocal boost.

At dawn, the Para's attack had bogged down, its vital sense of momentum blunted into a stalemate as the Argentine defenders were able to use the daylight to engage the lightly-armed paratroopers with their longer range direct-fire weapons in the clear air over very open ground. They had heavy machineguns, which out-ranged everything the Paras had. 'H' Jones' single-handed attack succeeded in breaking this stalemate – a sacrifice that rightly earned him the Victoria Cross.

This very near disaster was the result of the Paras being greatly outnumbered, but much more because of an inadequate allocation of the fire support upon which such a fast-moving, lightly-equipped attack always depends. Their gun ship HMS *Arrow* could not remain on station beyond daybreak because of the risk of air attack, but also suffered a malfunction. At daybreak on 28 May, the attack was left with only the battalion's own mortars, whose explosive force was mostly absorbed by the soft peat, and just three 105mm Light Guns – a single troop from 8 (Alma) Commando Light Battery, my old unit. With insufficient helicopters available to fly more guns and ammunition south to support the attack, the Paras were on their own.

'H' Jones knew full well the importance of his attack succeeding, which was why, in the traditions of the Parachute Regiment, he was up front in the battle, where he could have the most influence. His decision to take out the machine-gun position would have been made in this context with a very clear idea of the risks involved. He would also have been sure that his battalion would carry on regardless of what happened to him. His self-sacrifice was an action of the moment, taken deliberately and for the good of the entire land operation, by a very brave man.

Packing for Operation Brewers Arms involved a lot of kit: ten days' ammo and food in our bergens, plus a further seven days' worth carried in sandbags, to be buried in a cache once we got ashore. This cache also contained a very large ammunition resupply. We were

expecting quite a lot of 'business,' and would not be resupplied.

Our task appeared simple: clearing the enemy from a very large amount of real estate, without tying down units from 3 Commando Brigade. SF patrols had been in the area before the landings, noting regular enemy activity.

We were to land in troop strength: about twenty of us, consisting of three SB teams plus FO1 and a small HQ, then establish ourselves in the Volunteer Lagoon area. This meant digging in to make underground hides, bury and 'cam' out the cache, then send out patrols to locate the enemy. Once the enemy positions were located, we were to attack and eliminate them, using NGS (Naval Gunfire Support) to compensate for our lack of numbers. These attacks would have to be done at night as the gunships couldn't leave the safety of the air-defence screen around the *Hermes-Invincible* group until after dark. The Chatelaine (thermal imager) was also to be taken along.

Our insertion proved unexpectedly exciting.

We were to be taken out to the *Hermes* group in its holding position to the north-east by *Plymouth*, then fly across to *Avenger* which would steam south until near enough to fly us into the LS (Landing Site). Previous patrolling had shown the surf in the area to be too rough and unpredictable for us to use our boats, so the ship's Lynx helicopter was going to have to make several trips.

However, once we'd struggled from *Intrepid* to *Plymouth* by landing-craft, been steamed out to the fleet which was lying 100 miles or so north of East Falkland, and cross-decked on to *Avenger,* we'd run out of darkness. My time appreciation gave us only 30 minutes to dig in the cache and hide ourselves away before first light – which was not acceptable.

I knew the Captain of *Avenger* Hugo White, from the previous Christmas whilst in Belize doing NGS firing. I'd spent several weeks with the ship sailing round the Caribbean, culminating in a memorable visit to New Orleans, and had much enjoyed their company. It was very good to see them again. Hugo White was the archetypical heroic pirate captain, completely relaxed and friendly, never put out, amused and amusing, and always the complete professional. I'd lurked on the bridge as we'd steamed overnight from the Gulf of Mexico up the final meanders of the Mississippi River through Bell Chasse, Meraux and Marrero, to our US Navy dockside berth in the centre of the city.

But slow-moving tankers were blocking our route, endangering the timetable by which we were to cross the line between the US Admiral's office and our berth at 0900 local time next morning. As I was to see, this deadline was taken very seriously indeed.

The New Orleans pilot was slumped in the Officer of the Watch's

chair, baseball hat on the back of his head, drinking coffee. It seemed nothing could be done – until Captain Hugo lost patience and ordered full ahead, using both his engines alternately to jink past the tanker while avoiding leaving the channel or ramming the bow into the bank. The tankers' bridge watchkeeper was astonished to be overtaken by a British warship going much too fast for water skiing, hammering past with bow in the air and stern digging deep into the wake. Crossing the Admiral's line was achieved to the second, the Navigator squinting along his compass sight and counting down the yards.

When the difficulty of our present situation was put to him, Captain Hugo agreed that we should not go in that night but wait 24 hours. It was a very great help to have his backing in going against our orders, and, although not required, he offered to countermand our instructions himself.

Our many movements from ship to ship, with no notice and very often without knowing where our ultimate destination might be, were confusing to us, and certainly impossible for anyone else to follow. There were many other lost souls like ourselves being shuttled round the fleet, leaving a trail of belongings behind them. Even sailors of the ship's companies, who crewed the ships and had sailed them down to the South Atlantic, although remaining on the one ship, on any one day could be on another ship collecting documents or stores, and so on. Thus when a ship was bombed or sunk, it was extraordinarily difficult to get a definitive list of the casualties, and determine who was missing and killed.

With this problem in mind, each 24 hours, every ship was obliged to send a 'Souls on Board' signal to *Fearless* saying exactly who was on the ship at a particular time. If you left the ship five minutes after the signal was sent you'd be on the casualty list if that ship was sunk during the next 24-hour period. You might even end up being listed on more than one 'Souls on Board' signal.

The long pauses that occurred after sinkings and disasters like Bluff Cove, before the names of casualties were released by the MoD, were caused by the desperate tracing of everyone who had, like us, been moving around the Fleet, to ensure that only those who were actually killed, injured or lost were named in the casualty list. It's amazing really under the circumstances, that more people safe and sound elsewhere, were not reported lost.

In spite of very bad weather and *Avenger* rolling heavily and quite sickeningly, I managed to write this letter home, which I posted on the ship before we were flown ashore:

Nothing particular to report – I've been on several

different ships and life continues in its now normal way. I'm on *Avenger* at present, which was the ship I went to Belize and New Orleans in last Christmas. There are many friendly faces on board, including the Captain who is a particularly cool and capable customer. He greeted me on his bridge as one of his more unusual lieutenant-commanders (remembering the masquerading in naval uniforms I'd done at several of his ship's cocktail parties, having only combat kit of my own to wear).

The World Service has just announced the surrender of Goose Green – following a fairly canny pause by the MoD. I am really hoping that this will be the start of a 'house of cards' collapse by the Argentinians. I say this because the prisoners we have taken are all convinced that we were about to murder them and so had been fighting for their lives. Their misinformation system drums it into them that although we are signatories to the Geneva Convention we don't abide by it and don't take prisoners. Hopefully the public surrender ceremony etc at Goose Green, will remove this barrier to surrenders and make our job a lot easier.

I have the feeling that this will be the last letter I will write before this entire nausea is over – I am optimistic, but with the time it takes the get mail back to the UK and also because I will be out of contact for a while, I am hoping that my next letter will be in a relaxed post-crisis mood and that even by the time you receive this – in several weeks' time probably – it will have come to a conclusion. Now that these idiots have decided that their pseudo-Prussian military code does allow them to surrender they might start being sensible.

Wars certainly are different but really they are something one can do without… Not even the astonishingly helpful mask that quartermasters wear in war-time justifies all the nausea. I suppose as soon as the dust settles they will revert back to normal and ask pointed questions like 'Where exactly did you lose this or that', and 'No, you cannot walk in here and help yourself' even though you did so yesterday.

I had an excellent fillet steak on HMS *Plymouth* last night. [This refers to events that were in fact four nights previous. I deliberately wrote vague letters.] Apparently, so their supply officer was telling me, they acquired half a ton of the stuff and are having steak sandwiches as snacks and getting fed up of it. He was also telling me that when carrying some [SAS] troops to South Georgia they'd said jokingly they wanted a reindeer. The next day a helicopter

arrived and dumped one, gutted but otherwise intact, onto the flight deck. They hung it for a while then ate it. The head and skin were a nuisance though, on the upper deck. At night in the dark an unexpected cold, wet, gory nose is most unpleasant.

Hope all goes well and that the nice summery things are going well. I hope you don't run out of summer before I get back.

30 May was a very bad day, and sharing it with the crew of HMS *Avenger* was just about the only good thing about it. It was rough weather, and narrow Type 21 frigates move very sharply up, down, and side to side. I was seasick and spent most of the time horizontal on a spare bunk.

Throughout the day, there were the usual air-raid warnings 'Red', and as we'd left our lifejackets, anti-flash gear and once-only suits on *Intrepid* because of the operation, we felt very vulnerable. We were out in the Total Exclusion Zone with the *Hermes-Invincible* group and would leave them after dark to make our way to East Falkland and south to our fly-off point.

In the afternoon, after several air raids, we went to 'Air Raid Red' yet again. This time the navigator Peter Hatch (whom Captain Hugo laconically referred to as 'Pilot') said calmly over the tannoy that they'd picked up the signature of a Super Etendard doing a single sweep on his radar. This needed no further explanation, as by now we recognised the textbook indication of an Exocet missile about to be launched; the single sweep being to acquire a target while not offering a signal for radar-homing missiles.

The next pipe announced that the radars had detected an Exocet launch on a bearing heading for us. By this stage Andy Ebbens and I were face down on the wardroom carpet along with the emergency medical team who had their action station there.

Immediately the ship swung violently into a series of dodging manoeuvres, and the guns pumped off round after round of silver foil 'chaff' to confuse the incoming missiles' radar. This is a carefully practised drill calculated to 'convince' the Exocet that the image of the chaff is the ship, and to attack that instead.

The Super Entendard had launched its Exocet at 28 miles range then turned for home. There were, however, what seemed to be two A4 Skyhawks in front of the missile 'riding' it in, adding to the confusion.

At Mach 1.2 it doesn't take long to travel 28 miles and so the next pipe was the horrifying:

"Impact imminent 12 seconds. Brace, brace, brace."

We examined the weave of the wardroom carpet in some detail and tried unsuccessfully not to think of the *Sheffield*.

Exocet is programmed to hit the image on its radar screen amidships, nine feet below the top of her silhouette. The missile launched at *Sheffield* hit her in exactly that place. How far was the Wardroom from the Ops Room – the target point? Not far enough.

I've never been as frightened as at that moment. The rest of my team had gone up to the flight deck with their machine-guns because they wanted to do something – anything at all, rather than go down doing nothing. The imminent threat to life, and one's inability to do anything about it, made these moments so terrifying. Other dangerous moments, probably more dangerous than this, were not at all frightening at the time because we were in our own element on land, and could do something about it. But in a warship, even one as rigorously capable as *Avenger*, you are totally dependent upon others. My most fearful moments have all been in aircraft as a passenger, or as a passive participant in air raids.

From the wardroom carpet we counted off the seconds, hearing the roar of the Sea Dart missiles bursting out into the spray, the high-pitched chatter of our machine-guns, the deeper, slower rhythm of the Oerlikon AA guns and the pounding shudder of the big 4.5 inch gun.

Then came Hugo White's pipe:

"This is the Captain speaking. We seem to have splashed the Exocet with our gun. There is a nasty oily mess off our starboard beam, which seems to be the remains of a Skyhawk that flew over us and was splashed as well. You may be interested to know that the Exocet was only 9kms out when we hit it. I don't need to tell you that at Mach 1 that's not very many seconds. I told you when we left Guzz that I was lucky, well here's proof of it. Well done to you all for a very cool and professional effort."

"Boat crews assemble at the starboard waist. We're going to investigate the wreckage."

After such episodes everyone breathes out heavily and starts talking absolute rubbish in an animated way. I lit a cigar. Andy and I shook our heads at each other.

Another pipe:

"D'yer hear there. This is the Navigator. We've just recovered our boat and crew, along with several bits of what's confirmed as wreckage of an A4 Skyhawk. A document box has been brought back and will be stored in the seamen's mess-deck. A leg complete with flying suit boot with a book in the pocket was also recovered. That is all."

Before we set off on Operation Brewers Arms, SBS boss Jonathan Thomson had confided to me that when we returned it would probably all be over. We were always kept away from any planning about other ops that were not relevant to ours, especially future intentions, so that if captured we wouldn't actually know anything. This little hinted detail was of great comfort in the long days ahead.

We also knew that the Paras had now taken Darwin and Goose Green, that Teal Inlet was secured and that 45 Commando had marched to Douglas cross-country. Although suffering quite a few injuries, 45 were ready to move on again.

Air attacks were still judged likely, though directed at ships and large formations rather than us. Special Forces were deployed well forward to clear enemy OPs (Observation Points) and the flank areas. We were part of this effort.

The last intelligence report from our area indicated a platoon of around 40 men on Mount Brisbane and in the Eagle Mount area. They had a radar on Dutchman's Island to the north, and there was a good deal of enemy helicopter activity. Their defensive positions looked like shallow lines of trenches that would be easier to infiltrate, rather than – as British military planners would – being sited in depth making infiltration and attack far more dangerous.

There was also a serious possibility of enemy counter-attack threat after we took out their positions. They had several large Chinook helos, ideal for flying in a large enough rapid-reaction force that would have no problem taking us out if handled properly…

On the night of 30 May, *Avenger* left the *Hermes* group and steamed south on her own to put us ashore. We had on board the Lynx and crew from another Type 21 HMS *Ambuscade*, as *Avenger's* helo had become unserviceable. They unfortunately had no PNG (Passive Night Goggles) for flying in pitch darkness, so strictly speaking would have to turn on lights to land. As it was an enemy-occupied area I wasn't happy about this.

As we steamed down the coast of East Falkland, I decided to bombard the suspected enemy on Macbride Head and the radar on Dutchman's Island. This had been done by gunships on previous nights, so if *Avenger* continued down the coast shelling sporadically, she could also fire on Mount Brisbane without exciting any particular suspicion. This fire on Mount Brisbane would be very carefully timed to come down as the helo got close to the landing-site, and so mask its delivery runs.

It was interesting for me to be in the ops room during operational firing without any of the safety restrictions of peacetime. Without having one of us on the ground adjusting the fire onto the target, a

ship's radar could instead be used to plot the line along which the shells were going and roughly where they were landing. This was inaccurate, and like the philosophical debate about whether the cannon fired in the desert actually makes a bang if there is nobody there to hear it, there was no way of telling if you were hitting anything at all – but I'm bound to say that…

The whole ship shuddered as each round crashed off into the night. The darkened room was hushed, with only the gunnery orders being audible. The green glow from the radar screens illuminated the white-hooded figures crouched over them. Andy and I stood, rifles in hand, faces completely blackened, watching the scene. The computer-operator on a Type 21 frigate punches in the coordinates and the type of ammunition, then the gun trains onto the target, holds itself on target by constant adjustment despite the heaving of the ship and the imprecision of its course, then fires itself off. When the man on ground sends back a correction over the radio, the operator punches it into his console, while the gun reloads itself and fires again.

Accuracy depends on keeping the highly mobile firing system at sea locked onto a known position on the land, a serious problem that field artillery does not have to address. This is done by using a 'Beacon MIP' radar fix on that known position (beacon radar map indication point), then ensuring that the fix on this known point doesn't slip. The navigator has to calculate his position very carefully, monitor it and calculate his tidal drift, as a check on the computer which should be taking it all into account automatically.

Maintaining this Beacon MIP fix was to become a problem during the last week of the war, with tragic results.

At 0100 on 31 May the LS securing team, with Lieutenant Jim Searight and me plus our TI scanner, took off from the heaving flight-deck of *Avenger*. Jim was the brother of an artillery officer I knew, who was to be killed in a vehicle accident in Belize just over two years later. Jim had been on the final phase of his basic SBS selection and training when the Falklands crisis blew up. Jonathan Thomson decided he needed every SBS man he could find, so decreed that Operation Corporate was to be their Final Exercise. It was rather more realistic than any of them had imagined. Jim was enjoying life as an ordinary Marine in a patrol run by one of the SBS' frighteningly capable senior NCO's.

It was pitch black, the moon obscured by cloud. The Lynx was completely stripped of everything except the two crew seats up front. We hung on grimly in the back, to each other and to the mound of kit that was wedged between us. With no doors, we sat with legs dangling alarmingly out into the darkness, numb fingers grasping our weapons.

We flew in very low and fast, in spite not having night-vision goggles. As we came in over the land, the moon emerged from cloud and so, very cautiously, the pilot was able to land without using lights. I heaved a great sigh of relief, as our LS was overlooked by the prime enemy location Mount Brisbane.

The helo landed, we jumped down, and Jim and I ran away into the darkness with the TI scanner to check that the area was clear of enemy. Wally P. and a protection team took up fire positions near the aircraft and unloaded the kit. The shells from *Avenger* pounded down rhythmically on Mount Brisbane every time the helo appeared, and were accurate enough for our purposes. This was being timed in the ops room, by the ship firing every time the helo crossed a line on the radar that had been determined earlier by me, and stopping when the helo re-crossed on its return trip.

It took six Lynx lifts to get us in with all our kit, then the cache came in as a separate under-slung load in a large net. Jim and I moved forwards to Mount Brisbane to get a better look, but I could not really scan well enough to be certain of anything. I did not break the radio silence to the ship as the shells were accurate and also because we were close enough for the enemy's 155-mm guns to fire at us from Stanley. We knew they had radio direction-finding equipment and I was very keen not to advertise our presence by sending HF transmissions (which travel an incredibly long way and are easily detected) unless absolutely unavoidable.

Some people did not understand this, and when the need to minimise transmissions was accompanied by meteorological difficulties that made it impossible to get through, there were further misunderstandings with gunships risking themselves steaming into exposed gun lines then not being required to fire. I was surprised, and at times angry, at the lack of understanding back in the headquarters responsible for co-ordinating this effort. Sometimes it seemed to me, the implications of being extremely isolated and vulnerable, 20 miles behind enemy lines, were not understood.

The night was very clear and very cold. FO1 formed part of the perimeter security, whilst the cache was being dug in and cammed out. We lay in the mossy grass with the ice crunching under our knees and elbows, occasionally having fits of teeth-chattering and uncontrollable shivering.

From the moment we'd clambered aboard the helo back on *Avenger,* every weapon had been cocked ready to fire and the safety-catch applied. But then, in the moonlit quietness, one of the blokes accidentally let off a shot, with a shocking and frightening suddenness. I ascertained that no one had been hurt, and we waited. If there was an enemy patrol nearby, they would most certainly

investigate.

Also the main body of our patrol, digging in the cache, would now be at maximum alert in their fire positions, ready to deal with any movement – and we were out in front of them. If I attempted to go back and tell them what had happened, I'd probably be shot. Eventually Andy Ebbens arrived, very concerned that nobody was hurt. He'd taken a guess at what had happened, and had come forward on his own to check. The work on the cache continued.

These 'Negligent Discharges' as they are described in military law manuals, are very dangerous, often causing serious injuries and death. They normally lead to the culprit being charged with an offence, then punished hard. As we were going to be out for more than a week and the guilty man was not only aware of the possible implications of his error but was disgusted with himself, I immediately told him he owed me a drink and to forget about it. Under these worrying circumstances one extra worry, however small, can be one too many, and tip you over the brink. He still owes me the drink…

We spent what remained of the hours of darkness digging into the side of a peat bank, then spreading our ponchos and cam nets across the hole. With our peat walls built up and covered with turf, we disappeared into the moorscape.

The next day was bitterly cold, spent shivering and shaking in the peat bank, not being able to emerge from our cold, wet holes until after dark. Under these circumstances time passes very slowly, and having to get out of your sleeping bag to crouch in the mud every few hours as a sentry is depressingly boring.

At last light, after stand-to we packed up and moved towards Mount Brisbane. The team that was to observe the enemy position moved off up the mountain, where they would dig in so they could observe the Mount throughout the next day, before returning to us to declare it clear of enemy, or with enough information for us to mount an attack the following night.

It was even colder the next night, and at our new position the ground was completely frozen. Steve Hoyland and I tried to dig a two-man hole but it caved in, so we had to start again. It's a completely hopeless feeling when little things go wrong under these circumstances – this failure felt pretty cataclysmic at the time. Then followed another very cold day in the peat bog.

That night we received a long coded signal from our co-ordination cell on *Fearless* and decided to postpone further operations until we'd decoded it. It turned out to be fresh info about the enemy in our area, and a warning not to touch any Argie kit we might find as it was likely to be booby-trapped. (Someone had presumably been blown up and this was a general warning.) The OP team moved off to

a fresh position on the Mount.

2 June was another very cold day with constant rain, turning the peat bog into a riverbank. I felt like a character from *The Wind in the Willows*. It was now mind-sappingly boring as well as cold. We decided to send all three teams out to recce the remaining enemy locations simultaneously. With Mount Brisbane clear, we'd eliminated the key piece of ground from our operation. We hoped the Argies had been flown back into Port Stanley, leaving our area clear.

We moved our patrol HQ once more, to a position overlooking the LS for our eventual extraction. We dug very deep into the peat, and pitched a two-man mountain tent inside, covering it over with turf so you could stand beside it and not know we were there. This, with four of us crammed inside, was relatively warm and dry, and we were able to spend the long day chatting and making brews.

Inside we manned the patrol radio in case the three sections reported up with anything. The weather outside alternated between heavy driving rain and sleet, or heavy mist. The cold was constant and all pervading. At night or during periods of heavy mist we crawled out of our holes to attend the calls of nature and squat close to each other and have whispered conversations. In our four-man shelter we told stories about how we'd spent the past Christmas, where we were going to get drunk when we got home, what our most embarrassing experiences had been, and so on. I came to know every bar and pub in Middlesbrough, Steve Hoyland's home town. I felt I could go there on my own, recognise each place and be at home there.

These wistful thoughts were the practised reminiscences of people well used to being away from home and family, conversations of pure escapism, with each person having their own say and being asked questions by the others, even reminders of details they'd left out – as we'd all heard the stories several times before, prolonging the psychological diversion. The dripping walls of the tent and the sound of the artillery fire were at times completely forgotten.

At night we listened to the World Service. The Argies jammed out the news, except for some reason at ten o'clock at night. This strange period in our lives coincided with the Task Force's news blackout, which I later learned was imposed while combat supplies were being flown from San Carlos into the mountains in preparation for the final assault on Stanley.

Each night we hoped for news of the big push going in, only the learn that the positions on Mount Kent were being 'consolidated', or that messages were being dropped by canister on the Argie troops urging them in Spanish to surrender. We would debate every night (as we'd done continually throughout the campaign) as to when they would finally see sense and give up.

I spoke to Rod Bell, the Spanish speaker, afterwards as we sailed home, and he said that the leaflets dropped by the Harriers were in 'BBC' Spanish, which few of the Argie soldiers were likely to understand. Those who did he said would find the phraseology amusing rather than frightening, awe-inspiring or morale-sapping.

We could hear continual shelling day and night, particularly from the enemies' big 155mm field guns. There was also a lot of aircraft activity, with the sounds of jets and anti-aircraft fire coming from Stanley (we hoped Brit Harriers on bombing missions). Helicopters were flying both day and night in our area – which we knew were enemy. On several occasions the enemy 155s pumped a few shells in our direction – but not near enough for serious concern.

We'd lost radio contact with everyone. Our patrols could talk to us but were remaining silent – the usual situation, and they wouldn't transmit until they had something to report. We could not communicate back to *Fearless* even using CW (Carrier Wave, using morse code), because the local conditions were bad and the operator on board could only get bits of our messages. We spent night after night wandering around trying from different positions.

With HF radio it's purely luck when you happen upon a place where you can get through. Twenty paces could turn loud mush into clear, bell-like transmission. The land-based radio nets, which were much closer to us than *Fearless*, were using the same radio sets as us and we knew where (roughly) they were so we could orientate our radio antennae. They'd become much clearer, maybe from having moved closer, until we finally succeeded in getting through. Unfortunately we did not have the correct codes for their nets, but they did send our coded messages on to the ship. By this convoluted method we were able to hand on the information that we thought our area was probably clear to enemy and that, when we were certain, we'd report.

The patrols were finding absolutely nothing, so we called them back in, assuming that the Argie helos we'd heard must have been withdrawing their troops into an Argentine 'Fortress Stanley'. The patrols came tramping in the next night, and having run out of food ransacked the cache. Our message, that we had completed our evolution and the area was clear, was coded up and sent along with a request to be extracted.

Such was the pressure on helicopters being used to lift stores, mostly artillery ammunition, that we had to wait three days before they came to get us. We'd eaten all the food and were imagining hot showers and food on plates while we sucked our last Rollos and nibbled biscuits AB.

When the helos finally came, it was to a grid 1500 metres too far

north. When we failed to appear, they went away and it was only through having firm words on the radio with the helo tasking agency, and messages down the tortuous communication chain back to the ship, that we persuaded them to have another go at picking us up. Thankfully the same helicopter sortie returned, having refuelled in the interim, or we could easily have spent another three days waiting. As soon as their engines were faintly audible, we abandoned caution and any attempts at concealment, letting off orange smoke-canisters to ensure their attention.

Two Sea Kings arrived, one carrying the SBS OC Jonathan Thomson and his RSM, plus various other members of the SBS. Andy and a few others, less their bergens, were mysteriously taken on board and without explanation the Sea King took off. The rest of us started loading kit and men onto the second aircraft, which lurched upward and shuddered off at shoulder height, hugging the ground.

I clambered aboard the third Sea King, which took off and screamed northwards very, very low, following every valley and hillock. We had no idea whether we were going to a ship at sea or in Bomb Alley, or a trench or tent in San Carlos or Teal Inlet. Someone attracted (very carefully) the pilot's attention. He said San Carlos, so we all hoped that meant *Intrepid* and a shower, dhobi and hot food, rather than the shore-based option. I was very pleased to see her familiar dock and flat arse-end, and the marshaller waving us down.

The flight had taken 30 minutes, over Salvador and Teal. When we'd gone out on Operation Brewers Arms all these areas had been hostile, to be flown over only at night at very low altitude. Now the helos flew over by day. So although the war was not yet over as we'd hoped it might have been by now, we'd clearly progressed.

The same familiar friendly faces were as usual at the Flyco window over-looking the flight-deck. Roy Laney waved, and welcomed us back over the flight deck tannoy. But our happiness was short-lived.

The mysterious extra Sea King that had taken Andy and some of the boys off first, had been going to San Carlos Settlement with a coffin on board for a funeral. 'Kiwi' Hunt, one of the SBS' most experienced recce team leaders, had been killed during another operation, and they'd picked up his closer friends to take them to the sad ceremony. It was a bitter moment, particularly when we learned how it had happened. Kiwi's team had been dropped off in the wrong place by a Navy helicopter. Then while trying to locate themselves, they'd been ambushed by an SAS patrol.

That night, in *Intrepid's* ravaged gunroom-cum-operating-theatre, we tried to have a wake for Kiwi. It didn't really work. We were all too tired to do more than drink a can or two of lager each. Andy asked

for silence: “I don’t know what to say…..I’ve never done this before, and I hope I don’t have to do it again. A toast please… an absent friend, Kiwi Hunt.”

There was complete silence for some twenty long seconds. Then someone said to me, “Well, which ship are you going home on then, boss?” I said, firmly into the silence, “*QE2*. No doubt about it.” As I spoke, and it was a real wrench to try to make the feeble joke, talking burst out spontaneously around us.

# Chapter 11. Beagle Ridge

The evening of our return to *Intrepid* at the end of Operation Brewers Arms, Roy Laney had greeted me in the wardroom with the news that I'd just missed seeing my younger brother Peter by 24 hours. Lieutenant Peter McManners at that time was one of the troop commanders in 9 Parachute Squadron Royal Engineers, and had come south in the *QE2*, before transferring to *Canberra* at South Georgia. He'd spent the last night before being put ashore at San Carlos, on board *Intrepid*. His troop had originally been attached to the Welsh Guards, but to Peter's great relief (after a disagreement with their Commanding Officer during their last exercise in UK) had been transferred to the Scots Guards, with whom he remained. Roy had recognised our family similarity and introduced himself.

Although we never actually met whilst in the South Atlantic, I heard of Peter from several people throughout the campaign. It was rather a strange feeling to know that Peter was so close and yet out of contact. There was no reason or likelihood that we would meet in the normal course of events. I knew he would do his job well and could only hope that nothing bad was going to happen to him. There was no time for me to worry – but my mother, having her two sons bobbing about in the South Atlantic involved in mysterious military activities, had all the time in the world for that. It was very hard for both my parents, especially when the landings started and news and information dried up. All relatives were told at that point, not to expect to hear anything from us, as we would no longer be able to write. This very sensible advice brought to those at home the enormity of the transition from preparedness to actual combat.

While we'd been ashore on Brewers Arms, the air raids had stopped, the Argie Air Force having seemingly run out of steam. Everyone was much more relaxed on the ships, and *Intrepid* had been busy ferrying 5 Infantry Brigade ashore, who'd just arrived from the UK. They'd put the Welsh Guards ashore at San Carlos, but a few days later had to pick them up again after they'd got cold and wet. My Navy friends in the Wardroom were confused, nonplussed and in some cases angry after sheltering the Welsh Guards, and because I was an Army officer, wanted to tell me about what had happened.

The Navy are well-used to having the Royal Marines and Army green-beret members of Commando Forces on board. They therefore assumed that the Welsh Guards would be something similar. However it had rapidly become clear even to the saltiest of sailors that the Welsh Guards were nothing like as well prepared as they needed to

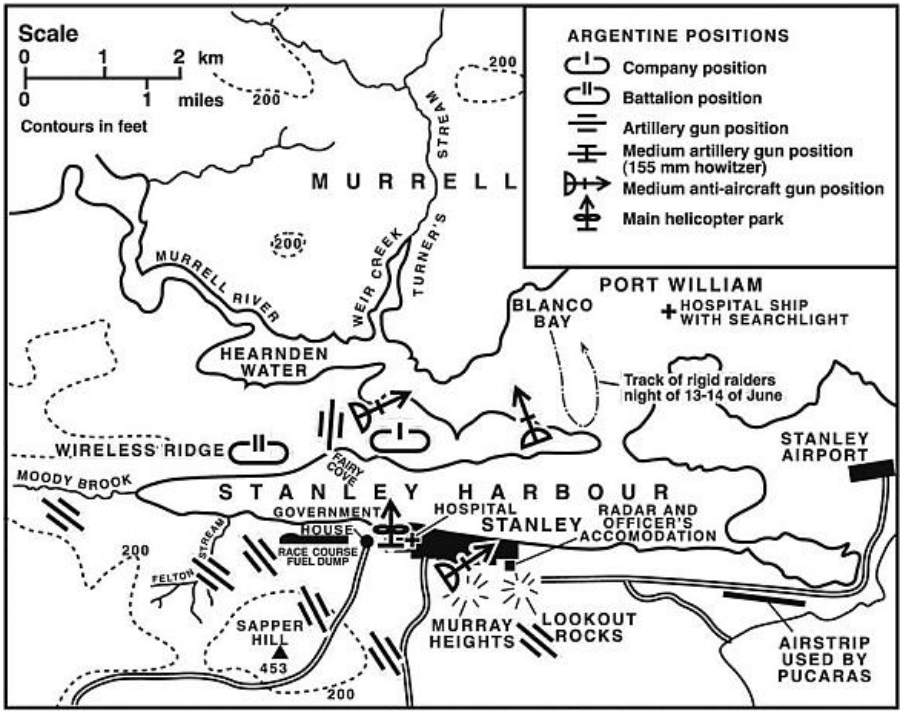
be. After confusions and difficulties, *Intrepid* had put the soldiers ashore, only to be recalled to pick them up again. This entailed a lot of extra work, with the LCMs ferrying the troops back on board, and much disruption of a ship that is difficult to operate even under normal circumstances. The sailors were shocked at the condition of the Welsh Guards when they returned after just a night or so ashore: wet, filthy, miserable – and obviously ineffective. Their yardstick was 3 Commando Brigade, who come back on board after arduous exercises in good order – even if we do leave muddy boot prints throughout their freshly cleaned ship.

With six hundred demoralised, dirty troops all trying to shower, wash clothing, eat and rest, the ship was in chaos. Then military equipment and personal belongings started going missing. One of my friends complained to the Welsh Guards hierarchy after his military equipment store was raided, to be told there was little that could be done. A senior Welsh Guards officer told him ruefully: "Taffy is a Welshman, Taffy is a thief." Helping yourself to other people's cassette-radio players was clearly stupid, particularly as the Welsh Guards were only to stay on *Intrepid* long enough to get dried out, rested and re-organised. The sensible man carried extra hand grenades rather than a stolen boogie box.

*Intrepid's* crew were very relieved when the Welsh Guards moved out – into the two ill-fated Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships *Sir Tristram* and *Sir Bedivere*, that were so soon to be bombed at Bluff Cove.

The day after our subdued attempt at having a wake for Kiwi Hunt (8 June), we were hung over in spite of having drunk very little, washed out physically, with our freshly dhobied clothes wet and drying out in front of warm air vents. Into this scene of tired domestic chaos, 148 Battery's Captain Bob Harmes arrived with the news that we were immediately to go back out into the field, to a most alarming forward position well behind enemy lines, overlooking the final objective, Port Stanley. Nick Allin and I just looked at each other and sighed wearily.

***Stanley Harbour Map***




We were to join D Squadron of 22 SAS, who already had a four-man patrol in the area. As they were all residing in the RFA *Sir Lancelot*, we were to change ships at once.

Getting ready to move across the RFA *Sir Lancelot* the day after we got back in after Brewers Arms was far from easy. All our clothes were wet, having been washed by us in the heads as soon as we got back on board. I'd completely dismantled all my webbing and emptied my bergen to clean out the mud, soaked rations and spare ammunition (that was going rusty). I was cleaning my Armalite and 9mm pistol when Bob Harmes came on board, and the bits were spread out, all over the cabin.

Bob did not know, and neither of us could guess for how long we were required to go out, nor did he know exactly what we were supposed to be doing. I was told initially that my task was to get onto Beagle Ridge with the aim of hitting the Hercules supply aircraft that the Argies were flying in and out of Port Stanley every night, as well as observing and sending back information.

The brigade staff, who were developing plans to attack Port Stanley from the western, landward side, wanted to get us into an observation position overlooking Port Stanley as soon as possible. It looked as though once there, it would be up to us to do what we thought best to support this plan, even though we would be told very little about the details.

All this quite understandable uncertainty added to the tension of

the desperate rush of getting ourselves together and on to *Sir Lancelot,* in less than two hours.[12]

As usual, having rushed around the ship like headless chickens to get the radio batteries recharged, weapons cleaned and reassembled, codes and maps prepared, rations packed and webbing and bergens packed and balanced… we had to spend the rest of the day waiting for transport across San Carlos Water to the RFA. The well-known military motto 'Rush to Wait' is particularly applicable in war.

As we sat in the cold on *Intrepid*'s flight-deck waiting to move to *Sir Lancelot,* the mail arrived. We all got letters except Des, who hadn't had one for a while and was very fed up about it. We read him bits from ours to cheer him up. Then someone gave him a thick envelope – the long awaited letter from his wife. He said he hoped we wouldn't mind if he read it through on his own, and moved to the other side of the crowded deck. We suspected things weren't going well with Des and his wife…

The lull in the Argentine air campaign turned out to be temporary. 8 June was a very bad day with the fleet being constantly stood to for raids, then stood down. Our trip to *Sir Lancelot* was delayed until late afternoon, then, as we finally set off in an LCM, we were caught in open water when two more raids came in. The landing craft could do nothing except heave-to until the strike was over.

After an hour and a half in the cold LCM, we came alongside *Sir Lancelot,* which was rolling in quite a stiff swell. There were only Chinese seamen who spoke no English at the rail, so a 'white man' was summoned… The stern ramp was broken and could not be lowered to allow us to unload directly into the hold. We had to climb from the heaving LCM up a rope scramble net on to the upper deck, and then pull the heavy bergens up by rope.

I made my way to *Sir Lancelot's* wardroom to find the SAS squadron commander Euen Houston. It was getting late in the afternoon and the SAS' evening orders, known as 'Prayers', were in progress in their makeshift office, with maps around the walls and ashtrays full of cigar butts. I'd missed most of it, but they went through it all again.

*Sir Lancelot* was a sitting target and had actually been hit by an Argentine iron bomb. Like all the RFAs, she'd survived many air attacks, being strafed by cannon and straddled by bombs. Thankfully the bomb had not exploded but had done considerable damage, which under less extreme circumstances would have required immediate and extensive repairs. The bomb had been released at very low level, lobbed into the port side of Lancelot at the top of her superstructure. Its weight and momentum had penetrated diagonally all the way

down through the centre of the ship, then out through the other side just above the waterline.

The hole was large, the bomb's wide, jagged trajectory smashing through walls, equipment and steel decks. Looking from the top of the ship, you could see all the way through to the choppy grey waters below on the other side. From the ships' usually dark lower decks, you could see the sky.

*Sir Lancelot* had been got back into action with a minimum of delay; the splintered fittings and wall surfaces simply ripped out and piled on the upper deck. The main passageway through the ship, the 'Burma Road', and the entire main galley with its fixed tables and plastic chairs, were a couple of inches deep in dirty-looking sea water. It was bitterly cold and everyone wore duvet waistcoats and pile jackets, the lucky ones with Wellington boots.

The hole caused by the passage of the bomb was utilised to provide an extra route through the ship. Ladders and rope handrails had been lashed up through the hole to the next deck, the biggest holes covered by cat-walks of wooden planks.

I dumped my bergen gear in a cabin to one side of the bomb hole, which looked as though it had escaped damage. Its wall had Formica panelling that was cracked and damaged. When it got dark I understood why, as strong, werewolf-inducing moonlight shone through a colander of ten pence piece-sized holes, the result of strafing by Skyhawk 20-mm cannon. The wind also whistled in – an overly healthily ventilated cabin.

I made my way up to the stern of the ship and the wardroom, to find several friendly faces grinning at me from behind beards and long hair. By this stage we were all beginning to look like bandits, and it just didn't seem sensible to scrape faces with razors. The Chinese barber was far too preoccupied with the war to do haircuts. Some people had come directly from other jobs for which a non-military appearance was an advantage, more like Knebworth survivors than Sandhurst graduates.

Another old friend, Captain Roger Dickie, was waiting in the wardroom. We'd been in the same platoon at Sandhurst ten years earlier, and our paths hadn't crossed since. Roger was a Royal Artillery air defence expert, in charge of a contingent operating shoulder-held Blowpipe missiles. When the ship was bombed, he'd lost everything except the clothes he'd been wearing. He wore the distinctive white plimsolls and blue shirt from a shipwreck survivors pack with a huge grin that was undiminished by all this chaos.

Throughout every air raid, Roger stood on deck to organise his missile operators and machine-gunners. He was determined to take a dramatic photo of a jet screaming in at 20 feet above the waves – a

potentially prize-winning picture that had now presented itself to him several times. But every time, he confessed to having completely forgotten about his camera.

The Chinese crew, caught up in a war that had very little relevance to them, were confused and far from happy. They shuffled morosely around their wrecked ship like oriental Michelin Men, wearing large orange lifejackets, steel helmets, anti-flash gear and all their clothes.

The Royal Fleet Auxiliary officers were not happy either. Both they and the Chinese crew were contracted in, and well paid for the dubious privilege of being in 'Bomb Alley'. Nevertheless, they complained loudly about having to stay so long in such a dangerous place, and questioned why the ground forces were delaying marching on Stanley. They had no idea of the vast amount of equipment and supplies, in particular artillery ammunition, which would have to be flown into position before a final assault could begin. To be fair to them, the Royal Navy did not always understand this either, so the rather bitter conversations I heard in that wardroom, although disappointing, were also predictable. Furthermore, being on board ship – even one so badly damaged – they could not possibly imagine the atrocious conditions in which the troops were living ashore. If they had, they would have realised that no one was delaying for one second longer than necessary.

The RFA officers were especially scathing about the way *Fearless* positioned all the ships during the raids, feeling that they were being put in unduly vulnerable positions. In fact it was quite clear that the RN escorts, the air defence 'goalies', were in the most vulnerable positions of all, and as a result had suffered the most. Of course, if you have only a few machineguns and Blowpipe missiles with which to defend yourself you'd feel exposed wherever you might be placed. Had all the equipment on board the RFAs not been needed, they would certainly have been despatched to the relative safety of the *Hermes* group at sea.

However, all these bitter discussions suddenly became shockingly relevant, because that night, 8 June, the two RFAs *Sir Galahad* and *Sir Tristram* at Bluff Cove were bombed with tragic loss of life.

After the lull in air attacks over the previous week, the 8 June was a major consolidation of whatever strength the Argentinean Air Force could still muster. At the end of that long day they'd lost twelve aircraft, but scored one of their greatest successes.

There'd been a steady series of air raids all evening, but we carried on planning and working regardless. There was vague news of an RFA being hit in the south, followed by a hint that our operation

might be postponed. Food and drink on board *Sir Lancelot*, courtesy of the Chinese cooks and stewards, was excellent. After all our adventures, a relaxing evening would be very welcome – as opposed to the nightmare of another helicopter night insertion. Nothing was certain and I was caught on the dilemma of remaining teetotal in case we did go in after a good dinner, or having a few much-needed beers and quite a lot of wine. Tough decisions, trivia mixed with tragedy.

Steve Hoyland arrived with some more mail that had miraculously found its way to us, which I read, then re-addressed to myself and posted on to *Intrepid*. There were music cassettes from home, and some quite old letters sent before the hostilities had commenced, including a much-forwarded, final rates demand in red printing which seemed absolutely ludicrous, from another very distant world.

As we sat down to dinner, it became clear that the news from Bluff Cove was very bad and that all the helicopters were likely to be used rescuing the injured. I decided that our op had become too difficult, and would certainly be cancelled. The wine list beckoned. When it became clear the Welsh Guards had suffered the most casualties, I could only hope that my brother Peter was all right. (I hadn't yet heard that he had been moved to the Scots Guards, and so was not involved in the disaster).

The food was superb: a choice between excellent Chinese dishes and steaks, fish, cheese and pudding, with very good duty-free wine. Needing to build up the calories, we waded through a full five-course dinner with coffee at the end. Under the circumstances this seemed completely bizarre, but we required no persuasion at all to make the most of it. We had clam chowder, escargots, steak, pudding and cheese with wine, plus a couple of beers afterwards. The operation was then formally cancelled, we had a good night's sleep and the next day were able to have a leisurely and a comprehensive sort-out of our kit.

Looking back on that night, when the Argentine Air Force struck perhaps its bitterest blow, I'm amazed by how little we knew of what was going on at Bluff Cove, and how little it distracted us from what we were doing. We heard snippets of information from time to time; one report of how the Sea King pilots were performing miracles blowing the orange survival dinghies away from the burning ship, and conflicting reports of the numbers of casualties. I was beyond the stage of each fresh disaster making me sad, sickened, angry or worried. The five of us were living in each other's pockets and keeping our minds firmly on what we personally had to do. There was no time to consider anything else. As the news of the tragedy at Bluff Cove filtered through, it was yet another sadness to absorb. But it wasn't

our responsibility, and there was nothing we could do.

The casualties would be looked after as well as could possibly be managed, and so we made the most of the extra 24 hours breathing space that Bluff Cove had given us. I was very grateful for this extra time. Life on the front line is very much about living now. Sadness and the dead are put to one side until it is all over.

The Bluff Cove bombings killed some forty soldiers, and as with several other losses of life throughout the campaign, was badly handled by the MoD and Whitehall. Daily Star journalist Mick Seamark, witnessed the entire incident including the dramatic attempts by helicopters to rescue men from the burning ships. Seamark wrote what he described later as the most moving story he'd ever covered, despatching his copy by helicopter to one of the ships for transmission back to the MoD.

But his copy was 'lost' – most likely by MoD censors. The then Commander UK Land Forces General Sir John Stanier admitted its loss "was never satisfactorily accounted for". The Daily Star published the story after the war as 'The article the Ministry would not let you read at the time.'

Radio ham radio operators circulated reports of thousands of casualties. Buenos Aires quickly reported British losses as being the best part of a battalion. In reality, a third of the Welsh Guards were killed or wounded, which, coupled with the loss of equipment, did effectively put their battalion out of action.

The MoD agreed not to issue any casualty figures until after the final battles, because to do so would help the Argentinians. However, Bernard Ingham, Prime Minister Thatcher's press secretary, accompanying her on a trip to Dusseldorf, was asked about the most badly hit ship the Sir Galahad and said, "I can't think why everybody is making such a fuss about this, only forty people were killed."

The then Army director of Public relations Brigadier David Ramsbotham told me afterwards: "He had no contact with the MoD, this was a purely MoD matter, and none of Bernard Ingham's bloody business. Public relations in a war are nothing to do with protecting the reputation of a minister. 'Gotcha' type headlines persisted because people like Bernard Ingham at the very top weren't thinking through the implications. If they weren't being responsible, what could one expect of the editors?

After the war, when the piles of backdated newspapers finally reached us, we were to be very shocked and disappointed by the lurid, jingoistic newspaper headlines.

9 June was a relaxed day on *Sir Lancelot*. I spent the time trying

to clarify what we were to do once we managed to get ourselves onto Beagle Ridge.

My prime role had been to shell the C130 transport aircraft using the airport after dark. Then this was changed to that of gathering information and engaging any targets I could see. This presented me with a dilemma that was never resolved: did this mean military targets only, outside Port Stanley, or could they include military targets in the town itself?

We were not supposed to engage targets near any settlement. Firing near hospitals was totally banned, and as they were protected by the sign of the Red Cross, firing near them would also be a serious breach of international law. So how close to hospitals could I fire, and what were the targeting priorities?

As I pored over air photos and town plans, I realised that the Argies had interspersed their radar sites, troop accommodation and helicopter landing areas, between the civilian houses. All their Chinook helicopters were parked outside the town hospital, and as these medium lift aircraft were the means by which they could launch a surprise counter-attack on our vulnerable rear areas, this helicopter landing-site was an exceptionally high priority target for me. If we lost this war and I survived, it seemed to me that a war crimes trial was my most likely fate.

Beagle Ridge is part of the line of hills to the north of Stanley, about 6km from the town. The ridge rises fairly sharply from the Murrell River valley and is pitted with steep rock outcrops, which provide protection and cover. It is the coldest, bleakest place imaginable.

We would be just about as isolated as it was possible to be, deep behind enemy lines, far from any help or reinforcement. The enemy were known to be on the surrounding features, with an observation post 1000 metres to the north, and on nearby Mounts Round and Low, as well as the twelve thousand or so troops thought to be in Port Stanley, on Wireless Ridge, Mount Longdon and on the Two Sisters. The nearest friendly forces were 19km to the northwest on Mount Kent, and the Paras about 13km away on Long Island Mount.

I was worried about getting us into place on Beagle Ridge without being spotted. However, once we managed to insinuate ourselves on to the Ridge, we'd be hard to find. Provided nothing happened to draw attention to us, we should be able to remain undetected. However, this was pretty hopeful… the ridge was comfortably within the range of all the Argentine medium and field artillery massed in and around Stanley. Intelligence reports indicated that in addition to the enemy positions surrounding Beagle Ridge, helicopter patrols kept

the area under regular surveillance.

My evaluation of the operation was nevertheless positive. The value of having one of our teams on Beagle Ridge I thought far outweighed the risks involved, and I was in no doubt that once there we'd provide good value for money. But the night helicopter insertion was an unknown factor. After the Sea King crash that killed eighteen members of D Squadron SAS, I was uneasy about helicopters. I knew I wouldn't feel entirely confident until the Sea King had flown away and we'd waited the necessary half hour or so to ensure that a curious enemy were not coming to investigate the engine noise.

At dinner that night Lieutenant Martin Eales, a Sea King pilot from *Fearless* who was to fly us in, joined us. I'd got to know Martin a little in *Canberra* and *Fearless* on the trip down, and his presence cheered me up greatly. He looked drawn and tired, having been flying all the hours the aircraft could stand. He was equipped with passive night goggles (PNG) so darkness was no problem. These goggles intensify tiny amounts of ambient light in what appears to be a completely dark night, to give a green image. But they give the pilot a narrow 'tunnel' vision, so he has to constantly move his head from side to side, and up and down in order to see to fly. The weight of the goggles (about 3lbs) and his flying helmet (another 3 or 4lbs) and the consequent eyestrain, produced splitting headaches after half an hour or so. It also meant he had to fly round the clock, resting in snatches whenever he could.

The overwhelming need for helicopters required pilots to ignore peacetime rules and flying regulations in order to get the many vital tasks done. Each aircraft has very precise tables that stipulate the maximum number of men and weights of equipment that can be carried. These figures had rapidly proved unrealistic in wartime, because of the vast amount of ammunition we needed to carry.

On our Fanning Head operation we'd carefully loaded exactly the right weight of men and equipment into the aircraft, which had been able to take off. It was bloody dangerous – but not when taking off, because if the aircraft was too heavy, when the pilot applied maximum power and lift, it simply didn't leave the deck. The dangerous bit was landing, which needs more power than takeoff. An aircraft too heavy to land, can't stop in time to make a sideways hover, and crashes into the flight deck. So once you took off, there was no question of re-landing until you'd burned off a lot of fuel…

So as these grossly overloaded flights were usually travelling some distance, as the fuel was used up, the overload reduced until a landing was possible at the other end. In emergencies, aircraft could only land after dumping fuel or load.

Sergeant O. and his four-man SBS team arrived on *Sir Lancelot* that afternoon, to accompany us onto the ridge. They'd been given the unenviable task of trying to infiltrate south to the Murrell River which they would swim, in order then to hide on Wireless Ridge – a hair-raising prospect about which they were clearly concerned. As with all special operations, the onus is on the men on the ground to do what they think is best, and Sergeant O. was going to stay with us for a day or so on the Ridge to assess the possibilities.

Just before dinner I was introduced to a Naval Wessex pilot Lieutenant Peter Manley (I think from *Fearless*). He was quite small, bearded and disarmingly cherubic. His idea was to fire his helicopter's SS12 rockets at Government House in Stanley with the aim of killing General Menendez.

SS11 rockets can only be fired from the hover and have to be guided every metre of the way to the target. Whilst this is being done, the helicopter cannot move, and so is extremely vulnerable.

Peter wanted to make his approach over Berkeley Sound at first light, then hover behind our position – as this would be the safest place for him, as our presence guaranteed it clear of any enemy.

It was certainly the safest place for him, but I really didn't want the attention of every single Argentine soldier in Port Stanley being focused on where we were hiding. We'd already experienced the hail of spent rockets, AP (Armour Piercing) bullets and cannon shells that fall in the wake of departing aircraft, and I had no desire to compare Argie anti-air ordnance with our own. I also wondered what would happen if the Wessex got shot down in our area and the enemy sent out a patrol to investigate the wreckage.

But regardless of whether this would actually happen, it was important for us to know about it, if only so as not to shoot him down ourselves.

After our second splendid dinner on *Sir Lancelot*, we humped our gear up on to the fight-deck into a line beside the fire extinguishers. As the sun went down over Bomb Alley and its sombre green hills, we loaded the bergens into the Sea King and Martin ducked around the fuselage doing his pre-flight checks. We waited until it was completely dark then climbed in, strapping into the net seats. The generators began their gradual whining crescendo, the two engines started, then with a rhythmic rocking the rotors engaged and turned. In the cockpit Martin and his co-pilot were checking dials and switches, talking to each other through their helmet microphones. Except for a few crucial dials, which were fully dimmed, all the warning lights and instruments were completely obliterated by black masking tape. The flight-deck crew operated in complete darkness, and only when Martin flashed a light from the cockpit to indicate he was ready to take off

did the marshaller flash his two neon wands plus a dim horizon-indicator on the flight deck, providing Martin with enough information to take off.

We flew first to *Fearless* because someone had forgotten something, then waited, burning and turning, until they came running back with whatever it was. As we heaved up into the darkness for a second time, the indicator lights on *Fearless* and the marshaller's wands went out, leaving us in the blackness of a cloudy, moonless night.

As soon as we got overland clear of San Carlos Water, Martin dropped down to about fifty feet. I could see him sitting with his back very straight, the PNG covering his face. His head bobbed continually up and down and side to side. He could only look out and not down because even the dim light of the few remaining dials would 'burn' into the PNG image and make him blind. The co-pilot handled the navigation and read the dials, and they were continually muttering to each other. I knew from experience this was not worth listening to: a particular brand of black humour featuring crashing and air disasters in general, so I was quite happy not to have headphones.

We hunched in the back of the Sea King, screaming along in total darkness veering from side to side, pulling up suddenly then swooping down to avoid hills and follow valleys. The perspiration caused by the loading of the bergens became a chilled dampness. The cold began to permeate the layers of clothing. The rear side-door was open and the wind swirled and buffeted. The darkness outside suddenly became a hill just feet away with sheep running in all directions from the sudden presence of the helicopter. The crewman sat on the sill with his foot braced against the jamb, his safety strap flapping violently in the downwash. Occasionally he would murmur into his throat-mike or flash his teeth in response to some joke from the cockpit.

We cut north over Douglas Settlement and flew down Port Salvador. The moon came out briefly and lit up a savage monochrome scene of smooth water and sharply indented coastline. We then cut up north again over Port Louis Settlement and along Berkeley Sound. The crewman held up two fingers to us and we grasped the quick release catches on our safety harnesses. As Martin turned sharply right and came in very low and fast to the east of Mount Round and its enemy position, he tucked into a fold in the ground, slowing down sharply. Ahead from the darkness winked a coded signal from the muted torch of the four-man SAS team that had been in the area for the past week. Martin flared backwards and landed; we got out fast with the gear. After a quick shouted conversation with the reception team, I waved the aircraft away. Martin pulled off, the crewman waved out the back and gave a thumbs-up, and they flew north towards the black water of

Berkeley Sound, very low and very fast.

It was suddenly still and quiet. We waited, lying in the wet tussock grass, heels touching and weapons pointing in a circle outward, on our own again.

We lay quietly for about three-quarters of an hour, getting colder and colder. There was no sound apart from the wind. Scanning with the NOD (Night Observation Device) revealed nothing and so we struggled to our feet with our bergens on our backs. I couldn't lift mine so the only way I could stand was to put the straps on whilst sitting on the ground, then have two people pull an arm each to get me to my feet.

We tottered off in a 'snake', a scout at the front with 5 metres between each other. Although dark, there was no cover and very little shadow. Frequent stops were made to scan ahead and to the side. There was one very exposed part across a wide, flat valley immediately behind Beagle Ridge, but the moonlight, such as it was, was from the south and cast a shadow to the north. Once we reached this shadow we felt safer.

Walking is hard at night, with tussocks, bog and holes in which to stumble. With the heavy bergens it was difficult to avoid falling. Our progress was punctuated by breathlessness, silent cursing as we fell and were helped laboriously to our feet again like turned-over turtles. The sweat began to flow inside our clothes and down our brows, necks and chests. When we stopped, the inevitable chill rapidly set in once more. My bad back was also starting to feel the strain, the pain turning these long deliberate progressions into real ordeals.

We moved along the north side of Beagle Ridge, until we reached the western end of the rock outcrop. There was an obvious summit about 600 metres further along and I did not want to go anywhere near that. If the Argies were able to get a bearing on our radio transmissions, then they'd inevitably shell the ridge, going initially for the summit (that is what I, in their place, would do). I wanted to be tucked away in a more random position.

We dumped the bergens in the shadows and Nick Allin and I went to search for an observation post. We found a suitable flattish bit with a rock outcrop to the rear as well as a deep gorge on the forward slope edge. The rocks to the rear would give protection and I hoped that the angled rock cleft on the top would be deep enough to get at least two of us into a position from which we could work. I crept up to the top of the ridge and the slab of outcrop, and carefully looked over the top. There below me lay our final objective, Port Stanley.

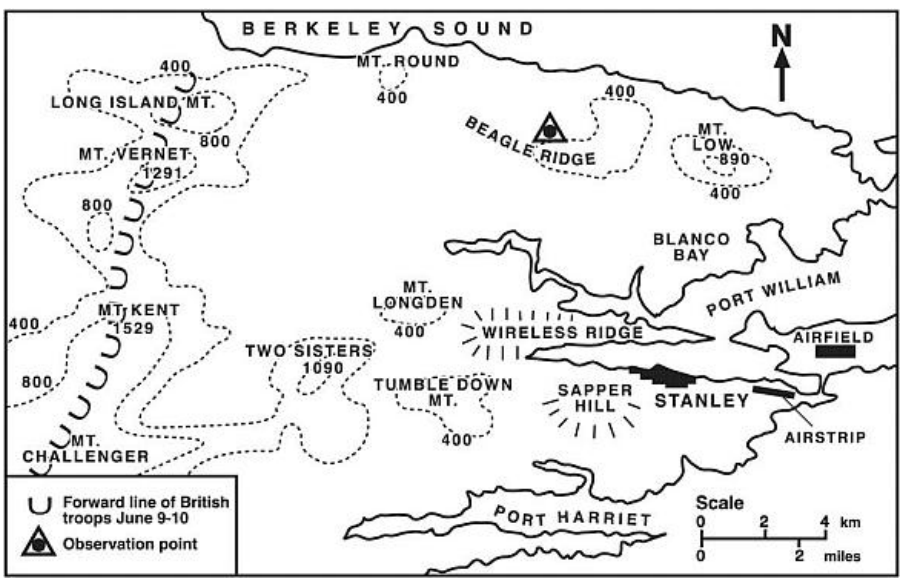
For the first time we were looking at the place we'd come all this way to recapture.

I was very surprised at what I saw. All the streetlights were

switched on, tiny stars of normality burning brightly as if none of this was really happening. The town's layout was revealed, showing the grid of streets, the blocks of houses and the line of the road along the edge of Stanley Harbour. In that bitterly cold night, the air was so clear that the lights seemed to be very close indeed.

To the right of the beaded necklace of the town, the shape of Sapper Hill loomed large with a saddle to the right leading up to Mount William and Tumbledown. The outline of Cortley Hill and Wireless Ridge occupied the foreground, and the bends in the Murrell River glinted greasily in the pale moonlight. In the very far distance I could see the silhouette of Mount Kent (to the far right) where the rest of the brigade were getting ready for the final push.

***Beagle Ridge Observation Point Map***




But far less picturesquely, less than a kilometre in front of us, were the tiny flickering lights of Argentine fires, around which, no doubt, shivering sentries were warming their hands and trying to dry out chilled feet. To our right on Wireless Ridge, and below us on the northern slopes of our ridge, were hundreds of enemy soldiers. The nightscope and Swiftscope revealed countless additional fires all over the hills in front and behind us, like tiny glow worms in the darkness.

I wanted to be absolutely sure of the ground before I started shelling near the town. The streetlights would be an invaluable aid, but I needed to confirm their location and numbers in daylight before using them as markers at night. The Argies might be leaving sectors

turned off to confuse us. I also expected that once the shells started coming down they would turn off all the lights – at least I would if I were in their shoes. Even firing well away from the town would involve a risk, as the first round of a naval shoot can go anywhere.

We had a gunship actually on the gunline waiting to fire should we need it. (This term gunline dates from when ships lined up to bombard a besieged port and then sailed back out to the fleet to get more powder and shot – a fairly similar situation to ours). I decided that, given the limitations of the gunnery system and the very sketchy information I'd gleaned from my map and air photos, the intelligence briefs and chatting to the SAS patrol, that I wouldn't fire that night. Once I was happy we were not going to need the ship for our own protection I released her from the gunline, to transit back to the safety of the fleet much further to the north-east.

Nick Allin and I manned the OP during the day, while Des, Steve and Tim provided our rear protection. They set about digging themselves into the turf at the base of the rock outcrop to the north, behind us, and Nick and I set about digging into our rock cleft. We were able to suspend a poncho at an angle over the lower bit of the cleft to keep the rain off. We put a camouflage net and some turf over the top, to blend in with the surrounding outcrops. The cleft was about 9 feet long and between 2 and 3 feet wide with a 30-degree slope to it, which caused us to slide down in our sleeping bags as we slept. We wedged the bergens into the holes in the sides, into which the wind whistled, and carefully arranged our webbing and weapons so that they were close to hand. I put my pistol on the ledge close to our heads.

Nick and I took it in turns to observe, the other sleeping or making brews in the shelter while the observer sat out in the open behind the rock parapet, with binoculars, Swiftscope and nightscope, several maps, the town plans and some photos of the main buildings. The HF radio, with its aerial bent backwards to as not to stick up over the silhouette of the skyline, sat on a rock ledge with its telephone handset and morse key. Our spare water bottles were kept handy to make brews and fill from a brackish puddle that Des had found further along the ridge. (It was very necessary to filter and sterilise this water, as I discovered to my cost later).

It was just possible, in the lower shelter part of the OP, to snuggle both in together – although one person had to sleep on his hip while the other was on his back. There was one strategically misplaced rock in my bit, part of the monolith and too large to remove. I could not stretch out fully, or lie flat. We did not cook at all during the night, but I did smoke the odd cigar under the cover of the poncho – fumigating Nick, who did not smoke. Map reading, radio tuning, etc.,

was done using a carefully shielded and much dimmed torch. A red lens completely covered by black masking tape with a single very small pinhole to allow only the faintest glow of light to show.

We were just on the forward slope of Beagle Ridge, which meant we could not move at all from the OP during the day. Because of the Argentine positions to our rear (on Mt Round and Hill 500 – just 1km away), Steve, Des and Tim could not move either. They took it in turns to keep watch and came over to see us at night. They had to dig what can only be described as shallow graves, with a hole at one end from which they could observe. The sharpest wind came from the north so they were permanently chilled. They could not, however, be seen, even in daylight, by someone standing a few feet away. Their discomfort was all the worse for the utter boredom of having nothing to do but keep watch during the long, cold days.

As it got light we came carefully out of our shelters to check that our camouflage looked all right and make a few additions and adjustments before the growing light of dawn made it too dangerous. The early morning was the best time for surveillance. The morning sun was soft and the air was clear. As outdoor photographers know, the quality of light is best in the morning or evening. The sun, coming up over our left shoulders, but still low in the sky, cast shadows that sharpened the outlines of the landscape.

Just after first light was also a time of activity in the Argentine positions. Figures would emerge from the rocks and gullies, some walking across open ground carrying their mess tins, going for breakfast. Groups of grey-clad figures would stand in circles with hands in their pockets stamping feet and slapping sides to get warm after a night in a cold sleeping bag.

On that first morning, 10 June, a light helicopter took off from the main Argie HLS (Helicopter Landing Site) in Stanley and flew in a methodical manner along the northern shore of the Murrell River, up all the creeks and then onto Beagle Ridge using Turner's Stream for cover. The aircraft was two hundred metres too far west to actually fly over the top of us, and went north toward Mount Round. He then clattered along the coast (presumably searching for any signs of landings having been made during the night) then, after a look at Mount Low, returned to Port Stanley.

Nick and I spent the morning matching the information we had with what we could see on the ground. We also needed to know exactly what ground we *couldn't* see, so that when at night we heard shells explode but saw nothing, we'd know where they might have gone. Called 'dead ground', this is what the observer cannot see because of the folds, valleys and hills. When setting up in a new observation position, the first thing you do is ensure that you've

identified all the dead ground in your sector. You then work out a strategy for not losing shells into dead ground, so that everything falls onto real estate that you are certain *can* observe.

This is particularly important with naval gunfire, as the movements of the ship make the accuracy of the first round of a fire mission highly questionable, to the extent that it's nicknamed 'the navigators round'. Once the fall of shot has been spotted and an appropriate correction made, the naval gunnery system is extremely accurate.

But the big danger of firing at night in unfamiliar territory, is of that first critical 'navigators round' being 'lost' in dead ground – as it could have fallen just about anywhere. If you apply a correction to bring it out from where you think it went, you might be moving it into some quite different area, and it may remain lost – and perhaps fall on something that wasn't a target. I was not prepared to run this risk so near to Port Stanley, so our dead ground trace was prepared with great care.

After several hours, we'd found six identifiable enemy positions: a medium artillery battery, an infantry troop defensive position, a fuel dump, eleven helicopters in a field beside the hospital and two targets close to ourselves that we would register to use as protection if we were attacked, on the most likely enemy approaches into our position. *In extremis*, forward observers usually bring down fire on themselves, on the premise that you know it's coming and can maybe survive, whereas it will certainly take the enemy by surprise.

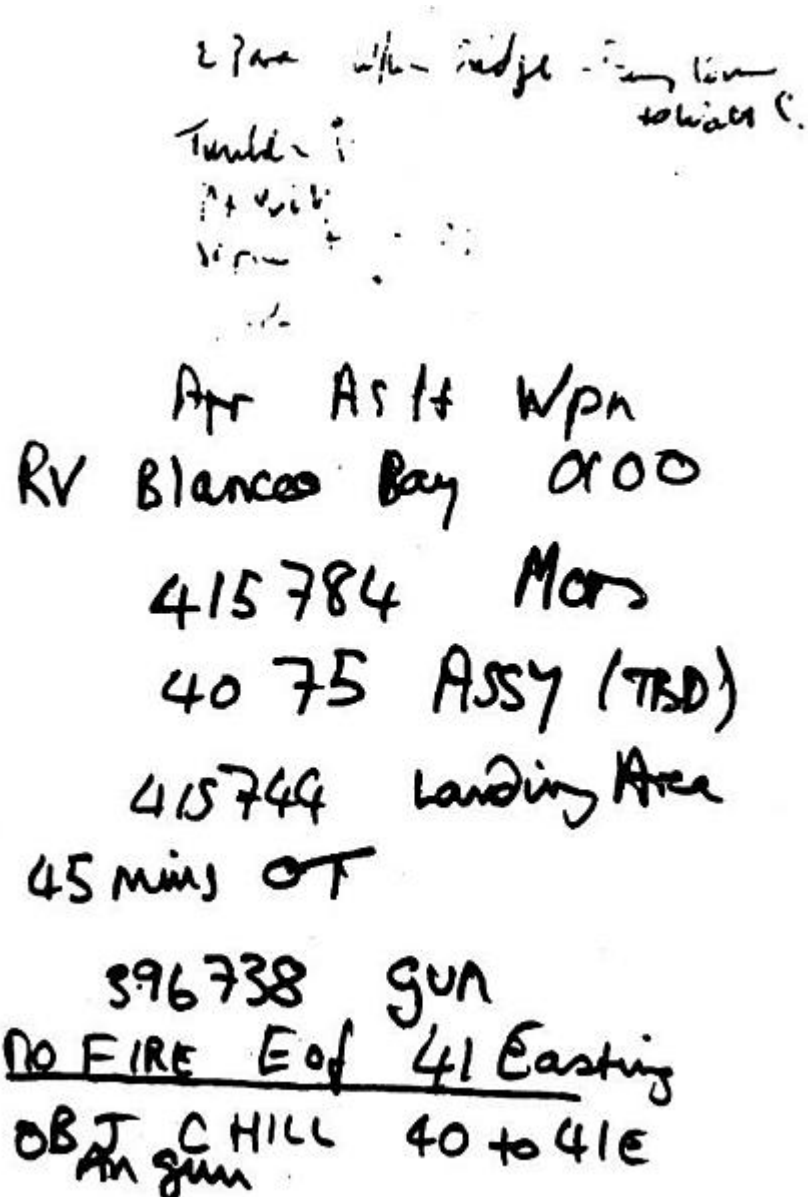
Nick encoded our initial target list, which he transmitted to the SAAC (Supporting Arms Coordination Centre) on one of our PRC320 HF radios. As we were eating an 'appetising' breakfast of baked beans, bacon burger and biscuits AB washed down with a huge mug of hot, sweet coffee, two Harriers appeared overhead, circled behind the ridge, and then went, one behind the other, to make a bomb attack on Sapper Hill. The bombs landed some 500 metres east of the gun battery we'd located, and there was so much flak being fired up into the sky that a re-attack would have been very dodgy. I tried to speak to them on our UHF radio, but even if they did hear us, they were fully justified in ignoring a strange unauthenticated voice purporting to be in a place where no one was supposed to be.

They over-flew a second time, this time high above the maximum altitude of the enemy's Roland anti-aircraft missile defence system, then exited north back out to *Invincible*.

We coded up another message to add to our target list, indicating where their bombs had exploded. The pilots would have been too busy avoiding flak and releasing their bombs to be certain where the bombs had landed. We also asked headquarters (the SACC – supporting arms

coordination centre) for guidance about firing at the helicopters near to the hospital.

***Beagle Ridge – First target list transmitted on 10 June***




*The first target list as transmitted by FO1 from Beagle Ridge on 10 June. This includes information on the effectiveness of a Harrier bomb attack and a query about opening fire on military targets near the hospital in Stanley.*

I'd carefully measured bearings from the targets to points on the

ground that I knew I'd be able to see at night. The streetlights of Port Stanley were an enormous help, and the silhouette of Sapper Hill and the curve of the Murrell River were also points from which locations could be determined. The brief flash of the shell detonating gives a quick burst of topographical information: the silhouette of a hill or ridge if it's landed in dead ground, or a black-and-white image of the target which you have to try to 'freeze' in your memory to determine the necessary corrections.

The ships did have star-shell that would float down under a parachute and light up a very wide area. In theory, the high-explosive shells could then be adjusted onto the target whilst the star-shell was still burning. But the firing of the different types of ordnance on different bearings and elevations gave the gun end added complications. Although the computer easily managed the calculations, the benefits did not always justify the extra trouble. We could adjust onto point targets without star-shell, and secondly – and more importantly for us – the use of star-shell tells the enemy that an observer is adjusting the targets, whereas shells coming down at night and happening to hit targets, might be fired purely from map data or radar. Star-shell would also completely destroy our highly tuned night vision, which would take an hour or so to re-establish itself.

Our first night's shooting was not entirely successful, but we did manage to set fire to fuel on the aviation-fuel dump to the west of the racecourse, as well as upsetting one of the gun batteries along Felton Stream, to the north-west of Sapper Hill. It was a confusing shoot, as the shells did not seem to obey the corrections I gave, and none of the usual remedies or ploys seemed to work. I estimated the error they appeared to have within their system, but they insisted nothing was wrong and were very unhappy when I told them they were to stop firing and leave the gunline.

I discovered afterwards that the ship had got her own position slightly wrong, her radar having surreptitiously shifted itself from the correct point (the Beacon 'MIP') to another datum point, which put her entire system out. As so often in the campaign, human common sense intervened with the technological complexities, and the next night the same ship was firing quite excellently.

Nick and I had, by this stage in the campaign, evolved a system for night firing. He would work the radio, establishing communications with the ship by morse and then going to voice as soon as she was close enough. We would start off with a target I knew would be easy to adjust, with as little dead ground as possible and well away from inhabited areas. I used my binoculars to scan the ground and measure the bearings and distances, using the graticules marked on the lenses for this purpose. Nick was constantly checking

the tuning of the radio and referring to his code book, so his night vision was impaired by his using a heavily-masked torch. He would also use the nightscope to observe – also a light source, allowing my night vision to remain intact.

The firing took quite some time, as we were extremely careful and methodical. It was bitterly cold sitting out in the cutting wind, not being able to move to keep warm.

Tim crawled over from the rear sentry positions to see what we were up to. He casually mentioned it was his 21st birthday today (it had just turned midnight). What can you say? We both wished him many happy returns.

The gunline from which our ships fired was to the north, behind our OP position. We could hear the ships fire in the distance, then the air turbulence created by the shells as they screamed in over our heads. Once we were on target the ship would pump shells onto the enemy position, one every three or four seconds with a distinctive, hollow, booming explosion from far out to sea. We ate Rollos, bars of chocolate, and nuts and raisins from our ration packs like squirrels, in order to keep warm.

Our SBS colleagues further along the ridge had decided not to attempt to move south, and the SAS patrol that had met us on the LS had been recalled to *Sir Lancelot.* A Sea King took them all away, from a site well away from our ridge.

Although now totally isolated, we were very much anticipating the start of the final attacks on Port Stanley. But the security isolation system of only telling us what we needed to know and no more, meant that what was to happen and the date of the big push was a matter only for conjecture and great interest.

We spent the next day with binoculars and telescope giving ourselves eyestrain trying to assess the results of the previous night's firing. Our picture of enemy dispositions was growing steadily. It's surprisingly difficult to determine whether the infantry trench position you're looking at is a platoon with some 30 members, a company of around 100, or even a battalion position with 600 and more. You have to observe what they're doing, recognise people's gait, body shapes and even faces (as they're all wearing drab dark green), then actually count each one.

Gun positions are hard to see, and very often it's only possible to locate one or two of the six guns, and perhaps a command post. I was looking through the telescope at one of the 105-mm guns we'd already spotted, under its camouflage net, when smoke came from its barrel. To my amazement, five other smoking guns appeared in the same small area – a battery position. Once we'd identified the centre of the

position, the rest were easily found.

The lines of Argentine soldiers wandering about at first light also gave us an indication of their defensive positions, and the equipment they were manning. To avoid missing things you had to let your eye 'walk' very carefully and slowly over the ground, pausing to look into rock clefts and around buildings. At high resolutions, the slight shake on the telescope, and the need to hold your breath when looking added to the fatigue caused by eyestrain. We had to take regular breaks.

Having 'stagged' each other in the OP all day (alternating between observing, and doing other things like cooking, eating and resting), we had a very good night's shooting. I'd spotted a radar dish antenna behind some prefabricated huts, which had been listed in the intelligence reports I'd studied on the ship as 'Argentine officer's quarters'. We'd watched a lot of soldiers going in and out, which confirmed this. I wondered if the radar dish was something to do with the land-based Exocets the Intelligence Cell believed were in Port Stanley, or possibly to give early warning of incoming aircraft. Either way, it was a very high-value target.

We'd also found a 155mm howitzer in a gun pit to the east of Sapper Hill. As there were at least two more of these, and they had plenty of range to hit both us and the rest of the Brigade, this was also something I was keen to take out.

All these shoots were technically difficult, and required careful thought, particularly about where to aim the first 'navigator's' round. Moving the rounds from where we would definitely see them fall, onto these targets – especially the ones in the town, was a careful, very tense progression, with brief discussions when rounds were lost in dead ground. Once we'd sent the correction, as we waited for them to fire, we'd discuss all the possibilities and how we'd adjust for the next round. The ship would report 'Shot' with the time of flight in seconds, which Nick would time, calling out the last five seconds to 'Splash'. We'd only look at the target for those last five seconds, conserving our concentration for when it really mattered.

That night we had a good go at the radar and the officer's quarters, using the streetlights to line up the fall of the shells. Blocks of streets lights kept going out then coming back on. It wasn't clear from the town electricity grid map I'd brought with me from *Fearless* whether this was because we'd hit a substation, or a belated Argentine attempt to turn all the lights off while we were firing. I don't think Nick and I discussed this concern. If the Argentinians had worked out that this shelling was being controlled by observers, with only a few places from which this could be done, we were in deep trouble.

But maybe we'd damaged the electricity grid, or maybe it wasn't

that simple just to turn all the lights off… Or maybe their fear of MI6 or Special Forces agents infiltrating the town under cover of darkness led them to try to turn off only the areas we were shooting at… This was all too much to worry about, so we didn't bother discussing it. As long as we remained here, undetected we hoped, we had to concentrate on things we *could* do something about…

We were able to set the ammunition piled around the 155mm Howitzer alight. It burned suddenly and with an extremely bright, fierce flame. We once gain set fuel alight on the racecourse dump.

At dawn the next day, we crept out as usual for the usual camouflage check, to spot a Royal Navy Wessex 5 helicopter making its way laboriously along the edge of Berkeley Sound. It came up towards our position then hovered in the lee of the ridge. It was another very bright, clear day, with the rising sun gradually shortening the shadows with its golden light.

The pilot of the clattering helicopter was presumably the small, bearded naval officer Peter Manley I'd met on *Sir Lancelot* and, as he'd promised, on this beautiful, bleak morning, was going to try to kill General Menendez.

The Wessex came over the top of our ridge then down, concealing itself in a tongue of mist that spread out from the west of Beagle Ridge to the Murrell River and along the surface of the water, like a grey curtain about 100 feet high. The helicopter clattered steadily, getting closer and closer to Port Stanley. Nick and I held our breath. He hovered over the top of an Argie anti-aircraft gun position we'd spotted the day before. I was wondering whether they had a sentry who was awake, and how long it would take to get out of their sleeping bags and man the guns.

The aircrewman (who I discovered afterward to be the appropriately named Petty Officer JA Balls BEM) fired the first missile with a loud bang and guided it onto the target, while Peter Manley held the hover. There was an explosion as it hit the upper storey of Stanley police station, where Menendez was said to be based.[13]

PO Balls fired the second missile, then, as the Wessex continued hovering, guided it onto the same target. Immediately it hit, the Wessex dipped sharply to the right and down into the mist to fly flat-out northwards. As it vanished into the mist, the AA guns burst into life and within seconds, the stunned silence into which the two rocket explosions had echoed, was shattered by every anti-aircraft gun in the town blasting away for several minutes. Happily this time, none of the residue of this firework display came our way, but we kept our heads down just in case. The engine noise of the Wessex died away to the north-west.

We continued with our routine of daytime observation and night time firing, until we received a coded message informing us that D Squadron 22 SAS would be flying onto Beagle Ridge to make a diversionary attack to complement the main effort. Des and Tim were tasked to secure and mark out the LS, then lead D Squadron back to our positions. Nick and I would be busy firing. It was a real relief to know that the end was nigh and that we were to be stiffened up so considerably on our lonely ridge.

We spent yet another day getting headaches peering through binoculars and telescope. The BBC World Service to which we were listening whenever we could, was saying little more than "Our forces are continuing to consolidate their positions and move forward equipment. The Task Force continued its bombardment of military installations." This last sentence referred to our efforts, which was a bit odd to hear on world news.

The results of the night's firing were very good. The 155-mm gun had been hit and knocked over, defying all-day efforts of its crew to get it turned the right way up again. There were huge holes in the roofs of the officer's quarters, and the large seaward-facing radar dish, which I'd spotted behind these buildings aimed south, was no longer to be seen. (Months later, back in England, I attended an intelligence debriefing in MoD Main Building in Whitehall. A colour slide taken by someone after the fall of Stanley showed this radar dish turned over and broken. The intelligence spooks confirmed my suppositions to have been broadly correct. The radar had probably been used in the successful Exocet attack on HMS *Glamorgan* earlier that week.)

Des and Tim's long vigil down at the landing site was rewarded by the arrival of D Squadron, plus a mountain of equipment. As Des reported back to us, interestingly the bulk of their gear was long, wooden crates holding Milan anti-tank missiles.

They also brought the sad news that Captain John Hamilton had been killed when his four-man patrol had been discovered in an OP near Port Howard. I'd met John a year or so earlier on the combat survival course at Hereford. He had a great love of mountains and an almost mystical interest in exploring the outer limits of his own endurance. He'd lived for some time next door to me on *Intrepid,* and his quiet sense of humour and gentle manner had helped in those anxious early days.

The manner of his death, surrounded by enemy, gravely wounded and giving covering fire to allow the other 'brick' (one pair in his four man patrol) to get away, and then his own 'oppo' to escape, was entirely in the character of the man. Like every one of our team leaders, I'd brooded long and hard about what we might do if one of our patrols went wrong. John did what I hoped I might have the

courage to do if the nightmare of compromise and ambush had happened to us. I very much liked him.

D Squadron also brought us some even more disturbing news, delivered to us in true SAS style.

A voice from the darkness: “Hello lads, is Captain McManners around?”

Then: “Hi Boss. How’s the Butcher of Beagle Ridge then?”

We didn’t laugh, and once the newcomers realised we hadn’t a clue what they were talking about, their mickey-taking stopped. Just as well, as we wouldn’t have put up with it for long once we did find out what they were talking about.

It seemed that on one of the previous nights, naval shells had killed several civilians in the town. The information was simply that, with the possibility that two of them were women. This very upsetting news was not something we could joke about in order to reduce its impact, but equally was not something we could afford to let get the better of us, so we simply tried to forget about it. Also it might not actually be true.

In fact, very sadly, it was all too true.

Swiftly an Argentine communiqué was issued:

> *Communiqué 150.* The Joint Chiefs of the General Staff communicate that yesterday, 11 June 1982, English forces began an indiscriminate bombardment of the town of Puerto Argentino, killing two women, aged 46 and 30, and wounding another two, aged 30 and 35 respectively, and two men of 32 and 35 years. All those concerned are residents of the islands (Kelpers) who were surprised in their homes by the naval bombardment.
>
> In relation to the event described, those Joint Chiefs of the General Staff point out with particular emphasis that, during all the naval bombardments performed by the English forces until now, the civilian population, who in this case were converted into a priority target, have never been attacked.
>
> It must be stated that modern firing systems that the enemy employs, as well as his training and experience, eliminate the possibility that what happened could have been an error.
>
> This attack, executed against innocent civilian townspeople, together with that carried out by English aircraft on the hospital ship *Bahia Paraiso* draw grave attention to the lack of respect for human rights shown by

Great Britain, an attitude that leaves no doubt in constituting an affront to the western world.

All the above is in visible contrast to the performances of the Argentinean forces who have acted throughout with maximum restraint and humanity, as is proved by the fact they took the islands without producing casualties among the English forces and the inhabitants, nor damaging their goods and properties.

*Communiqué 153*…. English naval units…… the following casualties:

Killed:

*Susan Whitley*: Aged 30 – British citizen.

*Doreen Boner*: Aged 46 – Citizen of the Malvinas, born 24/10/35. Passport No. 323490

Wounded:

*Mary Goodwin:* Aged 82 – Citizen of the Malvinas – very serious.

*Veronica Fowler*: Aged 38 – married – teacher – British citizen born Scotland 18/10/44

*John Fowler:* Aged 39 – father of two children: Rachel aged two and another born recently – seriously wounded.

*Steve Whitley*: Aged 35 – British citizen – Superintendent of Education – seriously wounded.

The health services in the zone are doing their utmost in their efforts to save the lives of the four wounded people.

These citizens, British and Malvinenses, killed and wounded by British weaponry, are the very same that the British government is claiming to protect and in defence of those whose interest it says it is waging this struggle for a land that it had usurped and therefore doesn't belong to it.

The next day, 13 June, the Ministry of Defence announcement had been made:

"Argentine sources have reported that two civilians were killed and four injured during the course of recent hostilities around Port Stanley. We cannot be certain about these reports but sadly there is some evidence that they are true."[14]

Since I controlled all the shelling around Port Stanley, the airfield and the hills to the west and north, it was definitely one of 'my' shells, which was deeply upsetting.

But there were serious practical implications. When we received this news – based just on the one-sentence MoD statement, it was not possible for me on Beagle Ridge to decide exactly on which night the tragedy had happened. The peculiarities of our first night's shooting (11/12 June) seemed the most likely. The shells had not fallen as we'd expected, and when I'd told the ship to check their system they'd been unable to find anything wrong. In the process, I'd 'lost' several shells in dead ground which should have landed well away from any houses.

But if the tragedy had not occurred on that night, then I was extremely worried. Every other shoot we'd done had seemed to go really well. I simply could not afford to have any doubts.

Once hostilities ended, 148 Battery were to gather on HMS *Fearless*. Our Battery Sergeant Major Jock Malcolm, who'd been the liaison officer on board the gunship on that first night, made a point of telling me what happened. He said that when the firing system had been checked, nothing was amiss and they assumed I was mistaken. I'd then told them to 'Check Solution' a second time, and an impasse was reached when still they could find nothing wrong. At this stage I terminated the shoot and ordered them to leave the gunline.

The next day, worried by my insistence, the gunnery crew made a complete check of the computers and firing system. They discovered a small deviation on one of the tracking radars, on the 'Beacon MIP', that would produce exactly the error I'd estimated the night before. To be proved correct after the event was a small comfort, but I was very grateful to have been told.

Such a comprehensive systems check would not have been possible on the night of the firing. On the gunline, a few miles off Port Stanley, the gunship was well within range of the land-based Exocets. (Later that same night, HMS *Glamorgan* had been hit by one of two Exocets launched from Stanley while taking a short-cut back to the fleet). All the ship's company were fully occupied with gunnery and the defence of the ship. They were over a hundred miles from the safety of the Task Force and its integrated defence of missile-carrying destroyers and carriers. It was the conscientiousness of the crew, checking in spite of believing themselves to be right, that unearthed the fault, hidden away in the complexity of the computer system.

It was a tragedy, part of the comprehensive tragedy of war.

Up on Beagle Ridge in the biting wind, this nightmare seemed yet another sadness to have to absorb. The SAS reinforcements, fresh from *Sir Lancelot*, who'd brought the bad news, had no details other than that two or possibly three civilians had been killed. I swore a bit. Then I carried on with the job. It had happened and there was nothing I

could do about it. The only response was to do as best we could to get the whole cruel business over with as fast as possible.

Later that evening, one of the D Squadron hierarchy (some officious officer or senior NCO) appeared in the darkness, demanding for some reason to know why we hadn't got a rear sentry. He only narrowly avoided being shot by both me and by Steve Hoyland – who was the sentry in question. Steve heard this man's bad tempered question, and hissed that he was just a few feet away from treading on him. Nick and I were firing and not in exactly the best of tempers. We told him to piss off, and he retreated in some surprise.

I also had a very strange conversation with one SAS trooper from G Squadron, who told me about how Kiwi Hunt had been killed. This guy really needed to talk about it, as if he had to get the thing off his chest. The conversation started with him asking me a question: had I ever been wounded? When I answered "No", he said he'd been wounded several times and it really hurt. I didn't know this guy at all, and had never actually seen him as it was dark and we were together in a hole in the rocks. He told me he'd been the machine gunner in the SAS patrol that had ambushed Kiwi's team. He said they'd spotted the SBS team a way off in their night scope, and had laid an ambush for them. He'd wanted to open fire with his machine gun, but the squadron commander had ordered him to hold fire until they were only ten yards away. The squadron commander then challenged the SBS in English. Kiwi behaved perfectly, freezing and holding both arms out to his side. The two behind him also stopped, but the man at the end, 'tail-end-Charlie', who might not have heard the challenge, tried to sneak off into the darkness. Tail-end-Charlie was thought to pose a threat to the SAS patrol, the squadron commander lost the battle of wills, and this guy – the machine gunner – opened up.

He said they should have opened fire much earlier. In an ambush where there's no time to lay Claymore anti-personnel mines out in front, it's usually the job of the machine gunner to trigger the ambush by opening fire. The ambush commander is always lying beside him, to give the order. It's sensible for an ambush to be triggered immediately there's a threat to the patrol, or when the entire enemy unit is within its zone of fire. Furthermore, the SAS usually operate on the assumption of no friendly forces being in their tactical area of operation, which can be a convenient justification for taking the easy option of opening fire and asking questions later. Normal infantry cannot take such a cavalier attitude as they invariably work surrounded by other friendly units. The SAS is all about decisive firepower – far more so than the more cautious SBS. There's also tremendous peer pressure in the SAS. Nobody would thank a colleague who held his fire and got it wrong.

The machine gunner told me the squadron commander kept ordering him to wait – whispering hoarsely in his ear, far longer than he considered reasonable. In the end, amid all the confusion of the situation the machine gunner's intense desire to open fire could no longer be constrained by the squadron commander, who, as the story was related to me, never gave the order to fire. I assume that nobody else in the SAS patrol opened fire, as only Kiwi was hit.

The machine gunner's abiding memory of this terrible moment was of the ammunition in Kiwi's combat vest exploding in the darkness as he took the hits. The machine gunner seemed to me to be badly affected by the incident, which had occurred very suddenly and shockingly at just a few yards range. He was derisive of what he said was the SBS patrol's reaction, singling out 'tail-end-Charlie' for breaking down in tears and pounding the ground with his fists.

There was obvious antagonism between the SAS and SBS throughout the campaign. At that time it was rare for the two organisations to work together, so there was a lot of mutual misunderstanding. It's fair to say the SAS believed themselves superior, showing a very obvious arrogance in this respect. In his diatribe of expiation, the machine gunner blamed the SBS: they shouldn't have been in the SAS' area; then having strayed in, got what they deserved…. and so on.

This was very uncomfortable for me to listen to, but I decided to keep my thoughts to myself and it rapidly became a one-way monologue, delivered as if I wasn't there. I got the impression that for this man, these were things that could not be bottled up any longer – anguish and confusion that could only be revealed to a stranger.

The SAS is a very macho and competitive organisation, which in those days – and certainly until the mid-1990s – was scornful of the idea that soldiers might need therapy after combat. This person sounded lost and very lonely, so I hope venting his anger and moral confusion on me eased his pain a little.

What with all this sudden socialisation, and the arrival of enough people to repel even an Argentine battalion attack on our position, things had changed very much for the better for us on Beagle Ridge. D Squadron commander Cedric Delves told me that the big attack was probably going to take place on the night of 13/14 June, with an initial push forward the night before.

Our friends in the other FO teams were going to be in those attacks. Close-knit little teams like ours, would be out in front of the commando and para units, bringing down NGS and artillery fire.

For the first time in the campaign, 148 FO Battery radio-checked as a unit. The brief snatch of voices on the radio net enabled us to

keep abreast of who was with which unit, and how they all were.

Our own commando artillery batteries were now moving up to within range of the targets we could see, so we started to fire with them during the day. That night, gunships were allocated to each of our fire-control teams, but with stringent ammunition restrictions to save resources for the big attack. As we were so far behind the front line with plenty of high-priority targets, we were exempt from this restriction, and carried on as usual. We had more good shooting: hitting enemy artillery batteries and infantry troop positions to the east of Sapper Hill.

On the afternoon of 11 June, our Naval Gunfire Control Net became particularly busy as all our teams established the radio net in readiness for the first big push. In retrospect I now know was to be a series of battalion attacks on Mount Longdon, the Two Sisters and Mount Harriet. But although we didn't know the geographical details, from years of military exercises of this scale, I knew from the radio procedures exactly what was happening, but not the objectives, or the directions of the attacks and the critical phases by which they'd do it.

It was a dark night, very cold and quiet. Crouching in our OP, Nick and I listened to our radio net, as the other FO teams moved towards their start lines. They made their routine reports over the radio, their breathing becoming laboured as they moved quickly carrying heavy radios and weapons across the rocky ground.

'Titch' Barfoot reported that the unit he was with had crossed their start line and were moving towards their objective. A very fit, long-distance runner, Titch was breathing heavily and whispering into the headset. They started climbing the hill and under the weight of their heavy bergens, breathing became even more laboured and their sentences truncated. Then came the chilling message, between gasps, "We have come under fire and are taking casualties."

One by one, the FO teams with various commandos and parachute battalions crossed their start lines. They were the same voices saying the same things as on countless training exercises. But this time they were our friends who we might not see again. After half an hour of tension, another call-sign asked the question that Nick and I had been dying to ask:

"Zero this is Zulu 41 Echo, are you in contact with 41 Bravo?" (Callsign 41 Bravo was Titch Barfoot's team)

"This is Zero wait, out to you, 41 Bravo this is Zero over."

"41 Bravo over" – the breathless voice.

"This is Zero, give Zulu 41 Echo a call. Out."

"41 Bravo roger out to you, Zulu 41 Echo this is 41 Bravo over."

"Zulu 41 Echo, can you please confirm that all your own call-signs are OK?"

"41 Bravo yes over."

"Zulu 41 Echo roger, Golf Lima, out."

The latter was one of several little messages that were now being slipped into radio transmissions. 'Golf Lima' was (obviously) 'Good Luck.'

By this time we could see lines of red tracer screaming out in long angry curves, some concentrated on particular places, some curving into the mountain and ricocheting upwards like sparks. The artillery of both sides were firing and the sound of shells whistling from right to left (ours going over) or left to right (theirs) was punctuated by the phut of a star-shell bursting then its wavering light, swaying under the parachute and making the shadows of the moonscape underneath elongate and deepen as the flare fell slowly to earth.

The enemy's medium artillery were putting up star-shell too, but thankfully they were unable to adjust it properly. Either the phosphorus burnt out on the ground or ignited too high to provide usable light for very long. The same was true of their mechanical time air-burst shells which particularly thankfully went off too high. This made them were alarming but not lethal – their bang a shock, but the fall of shrapnel too spread out and dissipated to cause serious injuries to people on the ground.

Understanding the science of artillery is very reassuring on a battlefield. If airburst shells explode directly overhead, the shrapnel will fall well to the rear because of the shell's trajectory and shell case design. You only take cover and pray when airburst flashes off in front of you.

Nick and I were spectators, listening to our PRC 320 HF radio, and trying to work out what was going on from the flashes and lights. Hitherto silent radio nets became suddenly alive with the clipped jargon of fire procedures, until it became too busy to make any sort of sense of it.

We were tired, and so despite men dying and history being made in the darkness around our position, we got our heads down to sleep. The naval shells continued to whisper overhead, the dull, heartless crumps of their detonation echoing across the dark hills below us.

The next day, D Squadron, led by the ever resilient and resourceful Major Cedric Delves, the man who'd led the Pebble Island raid, decided to take out the enemy on the two features near to us. From being a threat we didn't care to think about, the enemy we'd hidden from, were now a distraction the SAS could do without.

So just after first light, D Squadron advanced in a most unusual SAS operation – a conventional infantry company advance-to-contact. They had one troop forward, two troops back in an arrowhead

formation, and made a steady advance-to-contact toward Hill 500 and the enemy OP position to the north. On arrival, they found the enemy had fled and the position unoccupied, littered with empty tins and recent rubbish. They came back, had a cup of tea, then did the same thing eastwards to clear the rest of our ridge, finishing up with making attacks on Twelve O'Clock Mount and Mount Low.

The enemy on Twelve O'Clock Mount saw them coming and also fled, ditching weapons, rations and equipment. There was a degree of disappointment at this, as D Squadron hadn't even been able to lose off any mortar rounds as the range was too long. As we'd done at the end of the Fanning Head operation, the mortar team had to hump their heavy ammunition cases all the way back.

But FO1 was now totally out of food. I'd mentioned this to Cedric. The Squadron Sergeant Major now arrived behind our OP with a couple of sandbags full of Argie rations captured from Twelve O'Clock Mount. They contained lots of meat: stewed steak made in Argentina courtesy of Fray Bentos, and English roast beef.

The shelling from both sides continued all day, interspersed with bursts of machine-gun and small-arms fire. We knew from the radio net that our units had taken their objectives in the attacks and were now consolidating. This meant sending the prisoners rearwards to get them out of the way, then digging trenches, cleaning weapons, recharging magazines and replenishing ammunition. The sergeants-major would be listing to the names of casualties, taking ammunition orders and determining kit losses; and the unit commanders would be walking round their wind-swept positions talking to their men and planning the next stage of the operation. The boys would be tucked away into the rocks, brewing tea and munching biscuits AB, with sentries manning the GPMGs and anyone without a specific task taking what rest he could in the cold and the constant noise of the rather desultory firing and shelling that persisted.

We didn't know how many people had been killed. Dealing with the bodies isn't practised on most military training exercises. But this wasn't something we were thinking about…

We could see artillery shells exploding against the hillsides. It wasn't really possible to work out what they were shooting at. The Argie enemy gun positions in front of us were in action, their cam nets now partly drawn back, producing a cloud of white smoke every time they fired, which allowed us to see each gun barrel very clearly. There were larger-sized clouds over the Argie medium artillery positions, which, because of their great destructive force, were very much a priority target for us.

I was delighted when our Commanding Officer Lt Colonel Mike Holroyd Smith came onto our Naval Gunfire Control Net to give me

priority use of all our artillery to sort them out, as they were causing casualties on the Argie positions we'd captured overnight. Nick established communications with the commando regimental fire-control centre, which allocated a commando gun battery to us so we could adjust fire onto these gun positions. We settled down to capitalise on our ideal observation position.

It's not possible to destroy well dug-in military installations using artillery unless you are lucky enough to hit a key position, which for a gun battery would be its command-post tent. The shrapnel would kill the operators and shred the radios.

What are known as 'destruction shoots' can be attempted using medium or heavy artillery, but large amounts of ammunition have to be used. Our naval shells were large enough to be able to do this, and the small spread of the rounds (all being fired rapidly from the same gun) made it possible to concentrate on single objects like a bridge or building. But because of the threat of the Argentine Air Force, the ships could only come in at night.

The destruction of a gun position would be very difficult because the guns themselves are very robust, and each battery's various components are spread out over a 200 plus metre-square area. Nevertheless, the battery's operational efficiency can be drastically reduced by killing the men that serve the guns. Once the gun layer and the Number One (the soldier who sets the gun to fire in the right direction and at the correct elevation, and the NCO in charge) have been incapacitated, that gun will either not fire or is likely to be inaccurate. Each gun is surrounded by huge piles of ammunition, which can be set alight and be made to explode, making life very dangerous for the crews, and depleting their stocks.

In the Royal Artillery the firm rule is that if a gun battery is 'in action', i.e. firing in support of the infantry, it continues so to do regardless of whether it's under attack or being shelled. If the attack is likely to succeed, the GPO (Gun Position Officer) may decide to dedicate half his gun crews to fighting off the enemy, but the priority is to continue providing fire support, come what may.

In the days before artillery had the range to be 'indirect', i.e. when they fired directly at the enemy, they could not be sited behind the protection of hills and fire over the top. In order to hit anything, the guns had to be deployed well in front of the infantry, usually to the flanks. This put the guns into very vulnerable positions and they were often attacked, with many heroic, classic, medal-winning actions fought to get them back again. In the smoke and confusion of the battle, being out in front, the gunners usually had the only clear view of what was going on, and the infantry to their rear looked to them for moral support (as of course they continue to do today…).

To infantrymen looking anxiously from their squares and lines towards the gun positions, flustered gun crews suggested an incoming enemy assault. Gunners running from the guns (even if only for a cup of tea) could trigger a general panic. The tradition arose that although gunners run forward to their guns as the order 'Fire Mission battery' is shouted, when the mission is over the crews will form two ranks behind the gun, about turn in unison and march rearward from the gun, regardless of the situation. Our gunners did this in the mud and driving rain of the Falklands, in exactly the same way as they did in Korea, the World Wars, and before that.

The Argentine gunners were not so determined – nor so dedicated. As soon as they perceived the noise of incoming shells that might be intended for them, they fled the guns and ran for their protective holes in the rocks. Some half hour later, their sergeant-major or officer would emerge to scour the rocks and get them back to work.

Nick and I had worked out eight-figure grid locations for all the targets. Guns firing on this data were accurate to within a ten-metre square. Given the speed at which the Argentine gunners abandoned their guns whenever artillery shells came anywhere near, I decided not to adjust fire using single rounds as is the usual procedure.

Instead, I'd order all guns in the battery allocated to us fire three or four rounds, as fast as they could, directly onto an eight figure grid reference, so the enemy would not have the benefit of the warning that adjusting rounds give. We used proximity fuses when these were available, which sense the ground and explode the shell twenty metres above it. This creates a similar shot-gun effect to the navy's variable time fuse settings. Thus without warning, the Argie gunners were subjected to a furious hail of shrapnel, an aerial ambush which lasted about half a minute.

There was no point in firing any further shells, as after 30 seconds the survivors would have gained the safety of the rocks, fear lending wings to tired feet. The horrifying severity of these sudden attacks clearly affected them, and we noted a very marked reluctance to come out of the rocks, even after an hour and more. Whenever shells landed in the general area of batteries we'd already attacked, their crews dropped everything and ran, and the time interval between us shelling them and the battery going back into action lengthened.

I wrote in my diary for 13 June:

> Shelling a gun battery when it is in action firing at your own troops is actually quite satisfying.
>
> We were called up on the regimental net by [Bombardier] 'Blodger' Green (who was in [Captain] Nick

d'Appice's OP party) who, with 2 Para on Wireless Ridge, was under heavy artillery fire. We could hear the noise of it over the radio.

Blodger was wondering if we could do anything about it for him. We had a quick look and none of the enemy positions we'd tagged seemed to be firing, but there was another area we suspected was hiding a gun battery. We were given 79 Commando Battery, transmitting an eight-figure grid reference to them along with an order to fire 4 rounds fire for effect. As the shells came down, we could see men run for the rocks and a bright flame as an ammunition dump exploded, although the guns themselves were hidden in dead ground. Blodger came back up on the radio to say the fire had stopped, that they were able to move on, and "Thank you".

I wish they'd gone ahead with the plan to get guns forward and within range earlier. We could have done much more damage. (I understand that the gun batteries themselves were no problem, but would have needed a rifle company each to help protect them, plus a large number of helicopter flights to fly them and their ammunition into forward positions, when helicopters were in very short supply.) However, one must not indulge in this sort of criticism because decisions in battle are made in a very different environment with far from perfect information.

By concentrating artillery fire on the enemies' gun positions we were able to overturn guns, set fire to ammunition and vehicles, and keep their crews away hidden in the rocks for long periods. The 155-mm howitzer position seemed to stop firing altogether, the gun we could see pointing skyward at the same angle our naval bombardment had left it several days earlier.

There was also enemy artillery firing from the south-east side of Sapper Hill, over the top and out of sight to us. We wondered if this was an unseen part of the 'dead' 155-mm howitzer's battery, so we 'walked' a few shells over the top of the hill and into the dead ground beyond out of sight, to see if that would silence them. The results were inconclusive so I did not waste any more ammunition on it.

According to the handbook, artillery shooting is supposed to be a snappy, tense affair with the officer barking orders to the bombardier who queries them only in certain clearly specified instances; then the signaller sends them. In our case the signaller was freezing quietly to the rear doing sentry duty, and couldn't fit into our hole in the rocks

anyway.

I was on one radio and Nick was on the other, often doing different fire missions, or 'phoning round' the frequencies to obtain a gun battery that was spare. We were very tired and cold so were making mistakes (like saying 'left' when meaning 'right'), which the other would interrupt and correct. We would argue and contradict each other, take shortcuts to speed things up and get angry with people on the net. We'd tell jokes while waiting for the gun battery to process the data and fire the first rounds. We'd daydream to each other about what we were going to do when we got home (to the perfect world we'd left behind) whilst waiting for our next-in-line battery to finish off a fire mission for someone else.

During the shoots, our gun batteries were often reporting to us that a particular gun was 'Out', meaning that due to some problem it would not be able to fire. After some twenty minutes or half an hour the battery would report 'Number Three In' and that gun would fire again with the others. I only found out afterwards the reason for this.

In the soft, wet ground, the recoil progressively dug the gun's trails backwards into the ground until the breech was recoiling into a quagmire, with the layer sitting with his legs horizontal and bottom in the water. At this point the crew would declare the gun out of action and use spades to dig it free. Every available person would then help pull it out of the hole and up onto to a fresh gun platform where it would continue firing. This would create another watery pit into which it sank once more.

The gun crews were working extremely hard, carrying the heavy crates of ammunition from where the helicopters had dumped them, to the guns, breaking the seals, separating out the huge amounts of packaging, assembling the required fuses onto shells, then laying out the shells and cartridge cases ready to fire.

During fire missions, they had to heave the heavy rounds to the guns, lay the gun, load and fire. The guns themselves would have initially been dug into pits for protection, and then when the firing caused them to bury themselves, their protection became less important than firing, and more labouring was required to dig them out again.

When a battery is in action, actually firing, its location is obvious from the smoke and noise. Camouflage in between fire missions had to be of a very high standard because of the threat of Argentine air attack, and this required constant work replacing dead foliage on the cam nets, rigidly enforcing rules about not moving from under the nets by day, and track plans to prevent tell-tale wheel marks and footpaths developing between guns and command posts. Nick and I found the Argentine failure to observe these basic rules made it very

much easier for us to locate a position, then work out what it was.

The fast jets from the mainland (the Skyhawks, Daggers and Mirages, etc.) were lethal against our ships, but because of their speed, could only hit ground targets they could see a good distance away – due to poor camouflage, or a major installation like the main dressing station in the huge Ajax Bay meat packing station, which had been bombed. Brigadier Julian Thompson's tented headquarters was also bombed, thanks to sunshine glinting from the windscreens of two helicopters. This was yet another very near disaster with only minor casualties, including one of our sergeants John Rycroft.

Our artillery positions must have been superbly camouflaged in the bare-arsed terrain to have escaped being bombed.

The most dangerous general threat to our ground troops, apart from enemy artillery, was the Argies' turbo-prop Pucara counterinsurgency aircraft. The Pucaras were highly manoeuvrable and carried a very nasty weapon load. On the morning of 10 June, Nick and I watched three of them take off from the very short municipal runway in Port Stanley itself, just after first light. They split up and flew very low westwards towards Mount Kent and Long Island Mount. They could not be heard, and even from our ideal position were hard to see. We heard distant explosions as they dropped their bombs, and heard the clatter of our anti-aircraft machine gun response. Minutes later they reappeared and calmly landed just out of our sight.

By the afternoon of the 13 June, intermittent sleet had well and truly set in, the sky was clouding and a driving wind was cutting through even the many layers of clothing we were wearing. I had a thermal vest, string vest, Norwegian army shirt, cotton DPM shirt, arctic windproof smock, my quilted Chairman Mao suit plus waterproof trousers and jacket, with fingerless mitts plus normal woollen gloves stopping my hands from freezing, a woollen arctic head-over protecting my neck, a black balaclava and a grey woollen climbing balaclava hat. I was still totally, bone-numbingly cold.

The sleet was horizontal and gathering in rock crevices. More SAS had arrived during the night, with yet more equipment. In the morning, bodies encased in 'bivvie bags' were strewn around every sheltered cranny on the reverse slope of the hillside. Familiar faces kept peering over our parapet and asking how we were – quite a sociable day really.

Late in the afternoon of 13 June, Cedric Delves called an 'O' group (Orders Group) for their operation that night. I called the SACC and asked for an indication of whether we might have a gunship allocated. I knew that as our operation was a diversionary raid we'd

be at the bottom of the list of priorities. I argued that we should have a ship on call, but as I'd expected, was told we would *not* be given one.

The 'O' group took place during a snowstorm, in a small, clear area between the rocks. Cedric knelt on his sleeping-mat and tried to keep the wind from blowing his notes and map away. As the commanders of his various sub-units, we'd emerged from the darkness of our holes in the rocks and were blinking like badgers in the daylight. The SAS guys fresh from the ship had smooth faces and rosy cheeks, while we were sallow faced and sunken-eyed, bearded faces smeared with old cam cream and dirt.

My biro ran out halfway through, so I had to press hard on the paper with the useless pen to make an impression to re-inscribe afterwards. The proceedings were punctuated by pauses as Cedric tried to light the stub of a badly rolled cigarette in the swirling wind.

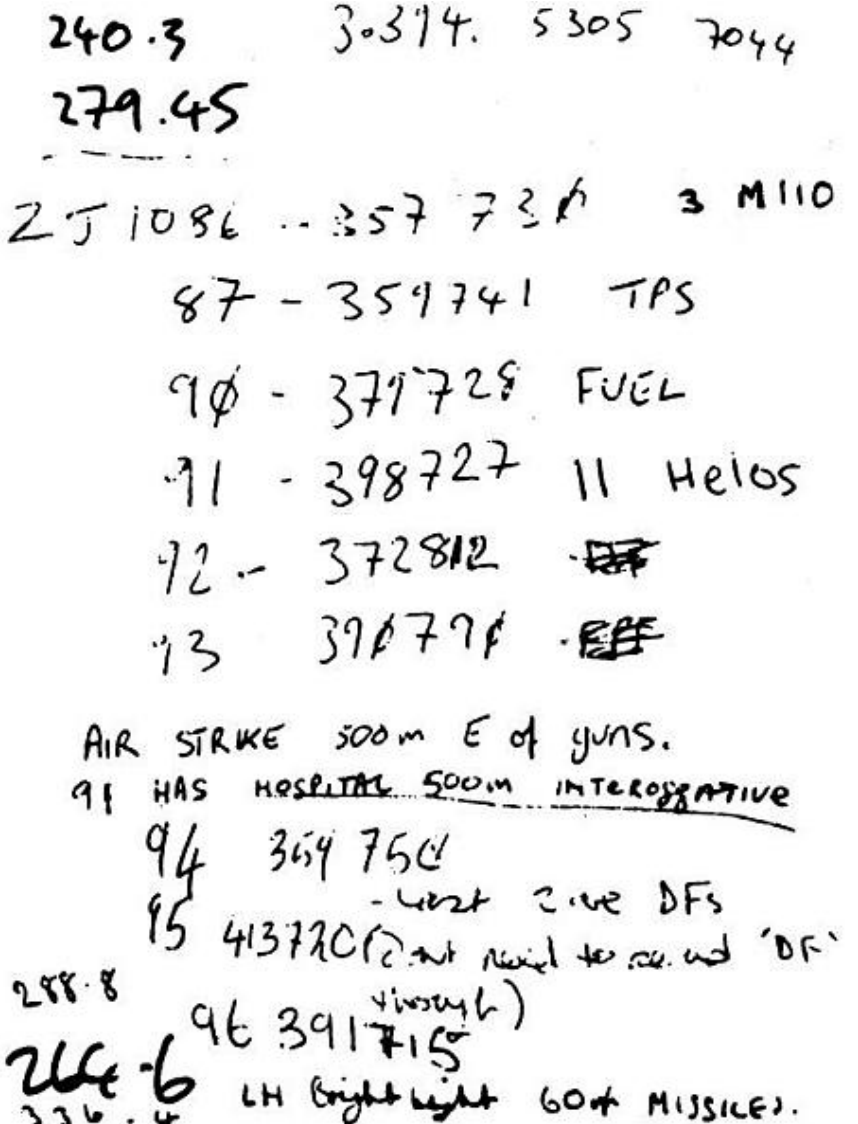
He went through his plan: to move south down to Blanco Bay and meet up with a group of Rigid Raiders from *Fearless,* then cross the mouth of the Murrell River to land on the north-eastern end of Cortley Hill. This party would be supported by a number of GPMG (SF)s[15] and mortars, firing from the high ground between Blanco Bay and Weir Creek.

The aim was to persuade the Argies that this was a large sea-borne landing, bolstering the main British attacks from the west by attacking Wireless Ridge from the north then linking westwards with the Paras. With at least two anti-aircraft batteries, a gun position and an infantry company on Wireless Ridge, there was no question of our actually attacking it.

This was similar to a diversionary raid carried out by the SAS some four long weeks ago, on the night of the official landings at San Carlos. Accompanied by two FO teams, the SAS had successfully created the impression of a major attack on Darwin and Goose Green, convincing the Argentinians that the main landings were taking place there and not at San Carlos, fifteen miles to the north.

When we reached the fire support section of the Orders, which people had learned to take very seriously indeed, I had to interrupt Cedric with the very unwelcome news that there was no NGS available to support the raid, as it had been allocated to the units actually doing the main assault. The mutterings and disappointment was understandable, especially in view of the huge success of the previous diversionary raid in which NGS had played so important a role.

***Notes from 13 June before SAS diversionary raid***


240.3 3.314. 5305 7044
279.45
ZJ 1086 .. 357 73[illegible] 3 M110
87 - 359741 TPS
90 - 377728 FUEL
91 - 398727 11 Helos
92 - 372812 [illegible]
93 397879 [illegible]
AIR STRIKE 500m E of guns.
91 HAS HOSPITAL 500m INTEROGATIVE
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288.8
96 391715 (visually)
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336.4
LH Bright light 60+ MISSILES.

*The first page of my notes from Major Cedric Delves (OC D Squadron SAS) Orders Group on the afternoon of 13 June, prior to the SAS diversionary raid in support of the main brigade attacks on Wireless Ridge and Tumbledown that night.*

For the first time in the campaign, I was no longer a top priority player, so if we came to need NGS to bail us out of trouble, it was vital for me to have the best radio communications possible. Nobody would have time to relay our transmissions or decipher what we might be asking for. If this operation got into trouble, I was going to have to lobby for a gunship being used by somebody else, who would either be part of the Divisional plan and so have a much higher priority, or have equally pressing needs but the enormous advantage of better radio communications.

My natural inclination was, as Cedric expected, to be part of the

attack, going with them down into the valley and across in the boats. But although that meant I'd be part of the battle, I'd be out of radio communications – and therefore useless. I could have relayed everything to Nick back on the Ridge or have told him to go with the SAS – which frankly never even occurred to me, particularly as he was the radio expert…

So after some very rapid thought as Cedric was speaking, I decided to remain on the ridge. It felt strange telling him that I was in effect refusing to go on his mission, which I had to do very quickly and firmly. We decided that Cedric would ask for fire if he needed it over his radio net, and I worked out some targets for him, giving him target reference numbers to use rather than complicated grids.

After this disappointment and rapid readjustment, Cedric proceeded to the 'Timings' paragraph of the orders format. Behind us, over the hill, there was the constant boom of artillery, the sound of the shells spinning across the front, and the distant clatter of sporadic machine guns.

"At eight o'clock there will be…"

Cedric never got the chance to tell us what would happen at eight o'clock because at that exact moment, there was a very loud explosion very close by and a whooshing, roaring noise. The 'O' group vanished like rabbits, diving into holes in the rocks.

Cedric remained unperturbed, kneeling on his sleeping-mat, trying yet again to light his appallingly badly rolled fag. We stuck our heads out to see what was happening.

"What the hell was that?"

"Oh I'm sorry, didn't I tell you? I was on my timings paragraph. At eight o'clock there will be a test firing of a Milan anti-tank rocket. I see from my watch that it is now just after eight o'clock."

The other NGS teams were clocking into the SACC by radio in the same way as the previous night. They'd been reallocated from the units from the attacks the night before, to the next fighting units. Fresh battalions were being brought up to take the lead, but with only five teams, our people had to move on after each battle, to whichever unit was leading the next attack.

I got onto the radio to our HQ, and once again lodged my point about requiring NGS for our attack. I was told that if the need for fire arose I would be treated sympathetically, which was the best I could hope for.

The shell and small arms fire were very much closer than the previous night, and the Argentine artillery seemed to be much more active. Their medium and 105-mm howitzer batteries were at work, with quite a few mechanical time shells exploding over Wireless

Ridge. It was reassuring to see that the Argentine forward observers had not learned the lessons of earlier nights, as these were also mostly too high to be effective.

D Squadron left Beagle Ridge just after last light, laden with GPMG ammunition, mortars and boxes of the Milan wire-guided anti-tank missiles. Des, Steve and Tim popped their heads over the parapet for a chat, then Nick and I settled down to another cold night in the OP.

We'd been listening to the shelling, the muffled boom of the guns firing, the pause and the whistling shimmer of rounds spinning across our front toward their targets. Then another pause, and the hollow thud and echoing crump of the rounds landing. But this time, the sound was different from the usual noise. We both noticed it and came to the same conclusion. Nick was down in the basha – our improvised shelter, on the radio and I was up in the OP.

"That one sounds like it's coming in!"

He scrabbled right down as far as he could go, and I was half into the basha as far as I could squeeze myself.

The first shell was short by about 100 metres and crashed into the forward slope of the ridge just below us. The other shells were in the air at the same time and the space between the rounds exploding was filled with the whispering whistle that large calibre shells make when they are coming for you. The next round landed a few feet below the parapet of our OP and filled the air with a peculiar humming sound.

Metallic ringing sounds made us realise this insect-like noise was shrapnel spinning through the air and ricocheting off the rocks around us. Jagged shards of hot metal, the size of a hand, cut sizzling into the moss all around us.

There was a pause while the Argie gunners adjusted their dial sights, then the next lot came down, bang on line. Thankfully, the unlucky one that comes right into our rocky cleft never arrived. Instead, the shells either plunged into the forward slope a few feet below or went over the top and into the peat valley behind us. I tried to get closer to the rocks and peat, desperately moulding myself to the shape of the ground.

There was another pause and we muttered at each other:

"Bloody hell, I hope there's not much more where that came from."

"They seem to have got us located all right."

I was very angry.

"That's bloody annoying. You spend days keeping your head down and being careful. Then those other buggers come along and wander about the place showing the Argies what's going on. Then they thin out leaving us to get all this."

A head stuck itself over the top of the parapet, a voice asking breathlessly, “Well booger me, that were bloody close. Are you two all right?”

Des thought we’d taken a direct hit and concerned about what he was about to find.

“Oh thank fook you’re all right. That were bloody close.”

I stuck my head back up to listen for any more incomers and said, “We’re OK mate. Still it makes a change from slaving away over a hot radio.”

“I’d best nip back in case there’s some more on the way. Keep your heads down, for fook’s sake.”

The shells stopped coming, the strong smell of RDX/TNT – High Explosive (HE) faded in the wind, and the lines of red, curving tracer fire started below us, showing us where the attacks had progressed. The SAS assault group were on their way down to meet the Royal Marines Rigid Raider assault boats at Blanco Bay.

The area then became illuminated by Argentine artillery para-illum flares. This was, for a short time, interspersed with mechanical-time HE, again bursting too high to be effective. (The D Squadron boys, on their return from Blanco Bay, said that nevertheless it had been an alarming experience, particularly before they realised the bursts were set too high.)

Rigid Raiders are flat-bottomed fibreglass dories able to skim across the surface of quite rough seas carrying up to eight fully laden people, who sit on inflated rubber sausages that absorb the impact of the flat bottom bouncing along the surface. The coxswain stands behind the upright steering column against which he must brace to avoid being thrown overboard. ‘Raiders’ are very fast and manoeuvrable, but tiring (from the jolting ride and the need to hang on grimly to avoid being thrown out) – and very wet.

The other two troops in D Squadron had moved onto the high ground to the west and were preparing the GPMG (SF)s – machine guns on tripods, for giving accurate sustained fire, the mortar base plate and a line of Milan missiles to fire across the water in support of the raid. The mortar line was in the rear. All this heavy equipment had been carried down the hill from our location. We could see tracer looping across to strike the black hump of Cortley Hill, which was almost certainly the support group of D Squadron above Penarrow Point opening up with the SF kits.

There seemed now to be searchlights coming on from time to time, down in the Port William area, off Doctor Point. These lights were being shone due west and turned out to be the Argie hospital ship lighting up D Squadron in the boats.

A hospital ship is neither Argentine nor British but neutral so long

as it wishes to be exempt from hostilities. It should certainly not have attempted to use its searchlight in that way, thus abandoning its neutrality. This was a very serious breach of the Geneva Conventions.

Nick and I sat chatting, shivering and watching. Tracer from further down the hill was streaming forward in long bursts onto Corley Hill. Our radio link with Cedric came to life with a request for help. The raiding troop was under heavy fire and having to withdraw. We got onto the NGS control net and asked for a gunship. Our request was immediately granted and we were told to contact Bob Harmes who was the LO on board. At this point things became very difficult because the gunship was out of range and Bob could not tell us when he would be ready to fire and was absolutely no use to us.

The next three-quarters of an hour were filled with frustration and anxiety, but no NGS. After half an hour of the ship being "ready within a few minutes" I called Captain John Keeling, the adjutant of 29 Commando Regiment RA and asked him if he could help me out. We'd also received a few more shells in our direction, and as they came in I reckoned I could see a flash from behind Cortley Hill, above Fairy Cove, where we had for several days suspected the location of a gun battery. I had an eight-figure grid of this to hand and gave it to John Keeling who promised to do what he could. All the guns were tied up with firing for the main attacks so I was not too hopeful.

John came back very quickly and said that there was six rounds fire for effect (from 6 guns – totalling 36 shells) coming down any second now on the target, and that he was sorry he couldn't do more for us. I was greatly heartened, keenly appreciating the problems of getting heavily committed gun batteries to fire an extra six rounds per gun onto a new target in the middle of a complicated fire plan.

The rounds came down beautifully, the grid reference was spot-on and they were bang on the data. There was no more firing from that enemy gun battery.

Cedric Delves told me later that the rounds had come crashing in at a most opportune moment as they were under effective fire in the Raiders, and suitably quelled the opposition. John Keeling came back up on the radio a little later on to check that all was well – another nice touch, as he was risking me him asking for yet more fire, further complicating his already grossly overloaded existence!

Things now became very confused whilst D Squadron were extricating themselves from this exposed situation, getting safely back onto the shore, and back up the hill to relative safety. They'd sustained a casualty and were arranging a casevac flight for him. However the injuries turned out not to be serious, but nevertheless,

swathed in bandages, he was evacuated to the MDS (Main Dressing Station), and then on to *Canberra* at sea.

When the raiding party returned, we were able to piece together what had happened. My suspicions about the Argie hospital ship were well founded. It had indeed been scanning with its searchlight, and may have picked out our raiding party as they crossed the harbour.

As the Rigid Raiders approached the far shoreline they'd come under heavy fire from three 20-mm anti-aircraft guns, small arms, mortars and heavy .50-calibre Browning machine-guns. This fire was accurate, leaving splinters in the hulls with engines being hit. The Royal Marines coxswains behaved immaculately, swerving and dodging the red tracer that curved out through the darkness at them. They'd become adept at steering while crouched behind the steering-wheel console.

It became impossible to try and get all the raiding party ashore and carry on as planned, so the Rigid Raiders made their way back to the exposure of Blanco Bay, running the gauntlet of what was clearly a strong Argentine defence.

To everyone's great relief only one man was hit, and although damaged, all the craft managed, one way or another to get back to safety. The 36 rounds that John Keeling had organised fell during the hazardous withdrawal of the squadron, distracting the Argies at a most opportune moment.

The weather was getting worse, well into the Falkland winter with dull cloudy skies. It was very cold, with bitter winds and sleet driving into our faces. The next day was a very tired anti-climax.

D Squadron made no pretence at camouflage, moving openly about the ridge, even in daylight. The ground was strewn with brown, 'bivvie' bags and recumbent figures covered in snow, bashas and even neat little camouflage-colour tents. Figures huddled in the rocks making brews, and people wandered over to see us and tell us more about the last night's excitement, which everybody agreed had been a very frightening experience, particularly as sitting in the Rigid Raiders, they'd been unable to do anything except pray.

In the hills to the south of us, the commando and parachute units, joined by the Scots Guards, were once again going firm on their objectives (having been successful), digging in, collecting captured weapons, shepherding prisoners away, making brews, sitting in groups muttering to each other and doing ammunition resupply. We could hear the FOOs (artillery Forward Observation Officers) on their headsets, bringing down artillery fire onto the next layer of Argentine defensive positions. Sentries would be sitting beside GPMGs with yards of carefully folded, shining, brass-linked ammunition, whose

cleanliness contrasted starkly with the accumulated dirt, damp and grime of everything else.

Nick and I cobbled all our resources together for a breakfast, our food running out yet again. We lined up the few bits and pieces that remained, sharing with the other three who were in the same state. The boys who were fresh from the ship gave us some tins, and we were also given the casualties' food. (It's customary when casualties are evacuated, for them to take only their weapon and some ammo – assuming they're well enough to carry it, leaving behind the rest of their kit for everyone else to use.)

Below us in Port Stanley we could see a fairly normal amount of activity. Vehicles and men were moving about the town, and the overall scene was much the same as usual.

The first indication that the war was drawing to a close was the establishment of a 'No-Fire' line beyond which we could not engage the enemy. Then, a little later, we were given the order 'Weapons Tight', and finally 'No firing unless in self-defence'.

We were now just sitting around rather aimlessly freezing, so our rear protection group came over to spend some time chatting with us. These chats were largely conjecture about exactly when it would all end, like the interminable sitting about that is usual towards the end of a big training exercise.

We could see groups of Argentine soldiers on the eastern slope of Sapper Hill beginning to wander aimlessly eastwards, and then the gradual development of a general movement toward the airfield. The soldiers from the various Argie gun positions were joining this exodus, which seemed to gather a strange, listless momentum as the day progressed. We presided over this scene, sending the odd report to the SACC to keep Julian Thompson and General Moore in the picture.

A Gazelle helicopter appeared, coming towards us from the north over Berkeley Sound. It landed to the rear of the ridge and Captain Rod Bell, the interpreter from the Fanning Head raid, and Lieutenant-Colonel Mike Rose, the CO of 22 SAS, clambered out. They explained that they were going to try and land on the Argie hospital ship and parley with Menendez. Rod had apparently been able to speak to them on the radio. Their aim was to try to bring forward the inevitable surrender. We briefed them on what we'd been able to see and offered advice about flying so as to avoid anti-aircraft positions. They clambered back in again.

The Gazelle pilot had in the meantime attached a wire cable to a large boulder, which he clipped into the lifting eye below his aircraft. From the cable he clipped a huge white flag. As they took off, the boulder kept the cable taut so the white flag flew underneath.

The Gazelle made its way slowly round Beagle Ridge to the east and towards the hospital ship. We heard no more until half an hour or so later when the Gazelle returned, landed, and Rod and Colonel Mike got out again. They'd had a favourable response to their suggestions, and were going to organise a meeting between Major-General Jeremy Moore and General Menendez in Port Stanley. They loaded their ball and chain back into the Gazelle and flew off.

The NGS control net started producing encouraging 'End of Exercise' type noises, with the exception of one message, which was that everyone else was likely to be stood down except FO1, who were to be prepared for 'Operations in the West'.

There was the danger, as the Argentinians had threatened, of the war continuing in the west, that only the enemy in Port Stanley might 'wrap'. There was no certainty that the large garrisons at Fox Bay and Port Howard were going to follow suit. Indeed, according to the rhetoric from Buenos Aires, these other outposts would be reinforced and continue to fight.

This filled our hearts with gloom, and I still wonder what the purpose of that message was. A deliberate security breach perhaps, to pressure the Argies who we knew listened very carefully to our NGS command net?

The idea of returning once more to those two places and doing further NGS raids really did not thrill Nick and me very much at that stage. Nevertheless we started thinking, as we had so many times before, about what we would have to do to get ready to go out again on operations.

But this time, it was with what we hoped was the reasonable expectation that our efforts would prove unnecessary.

To the west (to our right), there was much helicopter activity as our Sea Kings and Gazelles took advantage of the ceasefire to bring up rations and stores, evacuate casualties and shuffle people round. We tuned to the BBC World Service every hour to find out what was happening.

The programme was interrupted for a live announcement in Parliament. We heard the Prime Minister in the House of Commons announce that "White flags are now flying over Stanley". Nick and I checked the town very carefully with our Swiftscope. I assume there was a degree of rhetorical license in that announcement, as at that actual moment we couldn't see any white flags at all.

At some stage in all this confusion Major General Jeremy Moore went to the Governor's house in Port Stanley. He met General Menendez, and they signed the Instrument of Surrender, with the word 'unconditional' crossed out at Menendez' insistence.

The Paras were on the road ‘tabbing’ eastwards into Port Stanley, with Captain Chris Brown on the radio giving us a blow-by-blow description of the scene as they proceeded.

They approached the town through the now destroyed Royal Marine barracks at Moody Brook (previously home to NP 8901), past gun positions that had received our attentions, and eventually the racecourse. There were many more artillery guns than any of us had imagined, all virtually new and with unexpectedly large piles of ammunition around them.

As they progressed, whole blocks of target numbers became unsafe and were cancelled by John Keeling’s regimental HQ. The net became chatty. Sgt John Rycroft had remained on duty in the SACC command post during an air raid, to be injured by a neon light when a thousand-pound bomb landed nearby. There were solicitous enquiries over the radio as to his “light injuries”, was he making “light of them?”, did he feel “light-headed?” etc. The teams that were in the advance on Port Stanley took orders for Colt 45’s and sniper rifles.

WO2 ‘Brum’ Richards, from one of the gunships, transmitted a timely reminder that hostilities still continued. Amid all the *badinage,* a sense of wariness continued.

The surrender became official at 9 p.m. local time, which for us, on Greenwich Mean Time, was 2359 hours. At that moment I lit my last cigar (prior to giving up smoking) in celebration, and somebody made a cup of tea. We made our weapons ‘safe’, i.e. took off the magazine, cleared the round from the chamber and applied the safety catch. The NGS control net closed down until the next morning, and suddenly it was all over.

The next morning we formally closed down the NGS net for good, having finalised arrangements for the recovery of all our NGS teams as much as we could at that stage.

As the stations were signing off for the last time, a voice with an Argentine accent came on the air:

“You may have won Puerto Argentino, but the war is not over,” said this voice.

There was a pause on the net, then quick as a flash everyone came up in order:

“41 Roger Out.”

“41 Alpha Roger Out.”

“41 Bravo Roger Out.”

“41 Charlie Roger Out” etc… in drop-dead, split-second, *utterly* perfect radio procedure.

# Chapter 12. Waiting to Go Home

Back in UK, the surrender took Whitehall by surprise.

The experienced General Dick Trant was hurriedly brought into the MoD to talk to the press. The civil servant Ian MacDonald, whose 'speaking clock' voice had announced the disasters and successes with a ridiculous lack of animation or helpful detail, finally left the MoD's public relations department.

The Army's PR director Brigadier David Ramsbotham said that the whole thing had been a classic example of how *not* to manage public relations:

> "There'd been no arrangements for anything, like the getting back of photographs to UK, no briefing of foreign press who felt they were only hearing an English voice and were very suspicious of what they were hearing…. They could go to Argentina and hear all about it from them, but not from us. It was a total nonsense and need not have been.
>
> Earlier I'd written a paper saying how as soon as hostilities were over, we had to get parties of foreign media out to the Falklands before our forces came home, so they could see everything for themselves, then tell the story in their own way. I suggested I should organise this and go with them.
>
> As is the way of the MoD, it was then assumed that I was going, so I did.
>
> I left UK and travelled south to Ascension Island en *route* to the Falkland Islands themselves, with Governor Rex Hunt."

So… Naval Gunfire Forward Observation Team Number One were left stuck on Beagle Ridge in the driving snow without rations, while the rest of the victorious troops were marching into Port Stanley, where no doubt they would be warmly welcomed with whiskey and all the garlands and favours of war. In lieu of this, we passed round yet another gungy mug of peat-water tea. If you can't take a joke, you should not have joined.

With 'ENDEX' declared, all anyone wanted to do was go home. But there were the wounded to tend and collect, the dead to bury, and a very large and unknown number of prisoners of war. Units were spread out in the positions they'd reached when the final whistle

blew.

Stanley was the place with shelter and, being the ultimate objective, the infantry units got themselves there as quickly as possible.

The Divisional and Brigade Staffs were left with a new situation and a huge set of problems. In just a few moments, they'd gone from being totally dedicated to winning a war, to a very serious 'post-exercise' situation.

At the same time, mainland Argentina – as ever totally irresponsible in its amateurish jingo'ism, declared its continuation of the war. The Argentine Air Force has never been defeated and was frighteningly effective. It was thought possible the air attacks might start again.

We were greatly outnumbered by thousands of well-armed Argentinians, who were angry. They had to be looked after – fed, watered and sheltered, lest anarchy develop. In those first hours the surrender, the British Staff walked a tightrope, hoping it would hold.

For most of the troops still out in the mountains, any sort of movement was severely restricted by uncharted Argentine minefields, which continued to claim casualties. Our regiment sustained such a casualty only hours after the cease-fire.

Quartermaster Major Brian Armitage was advancing in the wake of the advance in his BV over-snow vehicle (a two-seater caterpillar-tracked vehicle that went very well over the boggy ground) but drove over a land mine, which threw the vehicle up in the air wrecking the rear, but thankfully not the cab. The driver was OK, but Brian had several vertebrae damaged and was unable to move. He lay in the open for some thirteen hours with the driver keeping him warm, before another vehicle happened upon them.

On Beagle Ridge the snow and wind-driven sleet continued. The next day it was rumoured we'd be flying out. We packed everything up except our shelter, as we knew promises of flights-out to be extremely fickle things. A large pile of leftover missiles and ammunition was gathered and carried down the hillside to the flat area that would become the landing-site. We posed for photographs on the summit of Beagle Ridge with a Union Flag that someone had brought for emergency identification purposes. The wind was so strong it was very hard to remain upright. The release of tension that cessation of hostilities brought is evident in these photos.

We were radio'd to expect a Sea King in the next hour, so we packed up our shelter and humped the bergens down to the LS. There was quite a considerable wait and it was very cold. When the distant engine noise was finally heard everyone was galvanised into activity, stores lined up on the correct side so as to be loaded straight on, sticks

nominated and grouped. FO1 were to be in the second stick.

When the aircraft came into distant view an orange smoke-canister was thrown to indicate the wind direction and leave no doubt as to our location. The first lift went off, and very soon we were clambering aboard the second.

The crewman handed round cans of beer – extremely generous and very welcome, but they made us feel ill. We thundered over the moorland moonscape to San Carlos Water to land back on *Sir Lancelot*. The SAS got out, and I negotiated our flying onward to *Intrepid* where we could marry up again with the SBS and our equipment.

When we landed back on *Intrepid*, Roy Laney was as always in his glass-fronted 'Flyco' box overlooking the flight deck, and gave us a huge smile and wave of welcome. We were now at home base, reunited with our baggage. It was also lunchtime, so we split rapidly to our respective dining-areas to eat at least three meals apiece.

Although we were now able to relax, *Intrepid* was far from being able to take it easy. She was due to sail for Fox Bay to pick up the Argentine garrison from there and transfer them to *Canberra* for the return trip to Argentina. In the meantime we boxed up all our gear and packed personal belongings. SB Squadron were due to go home on the RFA *Fort Austin*. We loaded everything except our personal kit on to the LCM that arrived to make the transfer. As far as we knew, we would shortly transfer with it. No one was answering my signals asking for firm instructions, so it was a question of doing what we thought best.

Des, Tim and Steve were offered a helicopter lift into Port Stanley, and so they went off sightseeing – having been urged by me to be bloody careful. I had not even the slightest desire to go, having become so intimately concerned with Stanley through the Swiftscope, and especially after the tragedy of the civilian deaths. I think Nick felt the same way.

We sat down on his mess-deck wearing 'Survivors' Kit' sweaters, plimsolls and blue trousers, as our combat kit was still wet from the dhobi. We drank a few cans of beer, and reflected on how well our 'scratch' crew had done.

Des, Tim and Steve came back from Stanley with some interesting 'gizzets' (the name for war booty; if you see something you want, you say "Give us it"), and tales of absolute confusion. And as one might expect, the taking of souvenirs soon got of hand.

There were so many brand-new weapons lying around ashore, some still wrapped in their original greaseproof paper, that everyone had acquired something. The most flourishing trade was shore-to-ship with the sailors, who were very keen to get their hands on a pistol to

show off at home. We realised that no one would be allowed ashore in the UK with any of these souvenirs. Consequently, the pistols and weapons that had been gathered by us in the normal course of the operation were sold to willing matelots who were delighted – until later, when presumably they had to throw them over the side.

*Intrepid* sailed for Fox Bay to pick up the Argentine garrison, arriving at night and putting a prisoner reception party ashore to meet up with a similar team from *Avenger* who were already there. The following day, once the prisoners had been organised, they would be flown on board and incarcerated on the lower tank deck. I should mention that on our sister ship *Fearless,* for three weeks before the landings, the Blues and Royals had been living there – an indication of the exceptional social acceptability of the lower tank-deck.

Lieutenant Paul Humphries, the co-pilot of the Sea King that had crashed into the sea just before the San Carlos landings, offered to take me along in his co-pilot's seat, to fly the PoWs on. After escaping from the sinking helicopter with only scratches after punching his way through the front windscreen, Paul had been seriously and understandably shaken by the accident. However, with the shortage of pilots, he'd rapidly returned to flying, and was still flying very long hours. It would be a long, boring shuttle run to and from Fox Bay, so we could chat.

We took off just after first light, and as we flew in, Paul showed me how to handle the helicopter using the dual controls. I flew the long runs in and out, making the easy turns, while Paul did the landings and take-offs. This was a real treat for a simple soldier.

*Avenger* was anchored in the centre of Fox Bay, not far from where we'd been in such difficulties with our sinking rubber boat a few weeks previously. The LS from where we were to collect the PoWs was on the periphery of Fox Bay East. It was a lovely clear day with the occasional sudden rain squall. The spartan beauty of the two small settlements was revealed in bursts of bright sunshine, and the weather-board houses with their red, corrugated-iron roofs and palisade fences looked very peaceful.

The LS was a large, green field with Dusty A. (the Quartermaster of the Special Boat Squadron) standing at one end, hands outstretched to marshal us down. There were also two naval officers, I supposed from Avenger, wearing that incredible garb naval officers wear when they leave their ships to 'rough it' ashore: black leather gaiters, blue waterproof jackets and big, blue, dustbin-sized berets; looking like building-site foremen crossed with members of a field-gun racing team. Their pistols and rifles, carried rather ostentatiously, seemed an incongruity, for the prisoners were lined up smartly and quietly in a

gentle drizzle. Most were under cover in the sheep-shearing sheds, but there were several lines of fifteen (a SeaKing-load) sitting in the open on their kit bags, waiting to be picked up.

There were also four Royal Marines, from the landing-craft detachment on *Intrepid*, with their officer. Just six soldiers and two naval officers were in charge of over 1,000 Argentinians.

A few Falklanders stood by, quietly watching it all. On a couple of occasions, before getting into a helicopter, one of the Argentine senior NCOs or officers would step forward and offer his hand to them, and pat the children on the head. There were farewells, and what I imagined could have been promises to keep in touch (but possibly not), being made in a strangely poignant scene.

Some of our prisoners did not seem to have been in a helicopter before, having to be told to put out cigarettes and shown how to fasten seat belts. The crewman had to heave them up through the door and stow the kit bags they were clutching, which were filled with tins of food. We took off with the first load, and as we got about halfway to the ship, with the doors shut a strange and very unpleasant smell began to accumulate, a combination of wood smoke and the dysentery from which most of them seemed to be suffering.

On *Intrepid* they were put straight down on to the tank-deck and fed immediately with traditional Royal Navy corned beef stew. They were noticeably less than delighted with this, but the ship did not have any other sort of food. The stew was nutritionally good. We'd been eating it for weeks. But despite their moaning, it was soon all finished.

Unfortunately the prisoners also made a disgusting mess, which was probably the result of their officers not bothering, or being unable to exercise any control. Back on land, there'd been trouble with Argentinean officers who'd attempted to keep their pistols because they were frightened of what their men might do to them. By contrast with their soldiers, the Argentine officers seemed to have been looking after themselves pretty well, so their fears were understandable. A naval officer at Fox Bay appeared at the LS wearing an immaculately clean, dark-blue greatcoat and peaked hat with gleaming gold braid. Their officers were clean, shaved and dry, whereas the soldiers were sallow-faced, wet, unshaven and filthy.

The dentist on *Intrepid* told me of one prisoner who complained of toothache and was escorted to the sickbay by Royal Marine guards. After his initial trepidation, this chap realised he was going to be treated and became very pleased with himself.

Treatment completed, the dentist had to escort the prisoner back to the tank-deck. It was late at night, the lights were dimmed and the

corridors deserted. The prisoner decided the dentist was a soft touch and started larking about, running off down the corridor and pretending not to understand. The dentist was carrying a sub-machine gun. When he cocked it, his charge, like a naughty schoolboy, put his hands up in acquiescence and behaved himself thereafter.

I finally received an answer to my various signals requesting instructions, and was told to get across to *Fearless* as soon as possible to join the rest of the battery. This was a pain as we'd sent all our equipment to RFA *Fort Austin* with the SBS. And so, once *Intrepid* returned to San Carlos (from Port Stanley), we picked up our remaining bits and pieces and changed ships yet again.

We were the last of the FO teams to make it to *Fearless*. The one outstanding member was WO2 'Brum' Richards who was away with HMS *Yarmouth* in the extreme southeast of the area of operation obtaining the surrender of the one remaining Argentine outpost at South Thule, to wind the whole thing up.

It was great to see everyone again, with much teasing and laughter. Captain Kevin Arnold was complaining he hadn't had any mail for weeks, so in the same spirit as the prophetic signal I'd faked about 'Operation Penguin' way back in early April, we wrote him a very fruity letter from a fictitious girlfriend describing a torrid, highly gymnastic love affair. (Unlike my previous joke, I'm not aware that this achieved any level of reality in the real world.) Captain Chris Brown had his leg pulled unmercifully over newspaper reports of the "cool, calm voice of the Royal Artillery captain on the Pebble Island raid". Captain Bob Harmes, having been sunk a total of three times and bombed on several other occasions, was now very much the 'Jonah' of the fleet. (As the entire crews of sunken ships were returned to the UK, it was impossible for a sailor to be as unlucky.) Ship's captains and their war-hardened Masters-at-Arms had paled whenever he darkened their gangplanks. We hoped his luck had changed.

I spotted the familiar bearded pilot Peter Manley in the Wardroom during our first evening of conviviality, and complimented him on his dawn rocket raid on Port Stanley police station (he'd destroyed the building). He greeted me with great enthusiasm, as I was the only person who'd observed his attack. He dragged me over to corroborate his action to the other pilots – which I was very pleased to do.

The ever-increasing number of officers gathering in *Intrepid* was too much for the wardroom. We therefore took over the smaller gunroom mess – usually reserved for the midshipmen, claiming the territory by spreading out our dank-smelling sleeping bags. The boys were ensconced down in the lower tank-deck, and every night, laden

with bottles and beer cans from the Wardroom, we gathered down there, recounting our tales and catching up. I borrowed a guitar from the Captain's Secretary, and sing-songs developed.

We'd collected some splendid 'gizzets': a really handsome, polished-wood sniper rifle with telescopic sights, sophisticated night-sights, and even a .50 Browning machine-gun. Bombardier Jackson had been so impressed by its firing at them (until they'd taken out the crew), he'd carried it for miles insisting: "You never quite knew when it might come in handy". The weapons were duly listed and tagged, ending up being shared out back in the UK with whichever units could make best use of them.

Videotapes of news and other TV programmes were parachuted in from UK by Hercules transport aircraft flying south from Ascension Island. The first I saw showed the aftermath of the Goose Green battle.

It was very strange – and quite puzzling – to see the reactions of people at home to what we'd been doing. These old tapes were of limited interest. The media people had got a lot of it wrong, with an irritating punditry in their pronouncements. But the fact was, these news reports seemed almost totally unrelated to our actual experience.

As the air-link with Ascension became better organised, we received more up-to-date cassettes dropped by long-range Nimrod surveillance aircraft, containing news that was only 24 hours old. This was more satisfying. But above everything else, we enjoyed catching up on the summers' sporting events: Wimbledon, the cricket and the athletics had all been taped for us by some sympathetic agency.

"Now at last I feel the war is really over," announced Willie McCracken very loudly in the Wardroom one morning. "The RAF have arrived!"

Willie was not of course referring to the brace of RAF officers who had been on *Fearless* all the while, or to their heroic Harrier ground attack pilots, but to a sudden influx of healthy new faces immediately following the reopening of Stanley airfield.

The situation was an interesting example of how bad feeling between branches of the Forces can arise. Everyone was yearning to be off home, and if the RAF would permit their Hercules transport aircraft to use Stanley airfield, we could have been home in a day or so.

Yet the RAF announced it would take weeks to get the runways repaired. Unworthily perhaps, we suspected they dared not declare the airfield open to traffic too quickly as this would admit that the Vulcan sorties from Ascension Island had been a failure. We'd forgotten how at the time, those same Vulcan sorties had provided such a great boost to our morale. We failed too in rational

appreciation of the strategic position. The overall objective could not be our speedy repatriation, which could wait; the vital thing was to repair and improve the runways so that the RAF's all-weather Phantom air-defence fighters could operate. Once the Phantoms were on station, the Argentinean Air Force could not restart the war.

But we were almost unbearably impatient to be on our way, so when we heard a buzz that *Canberra* was sailing soon, we decided we should travel in her. There was no authority who could (or would) authorise or equally prohibit this suggestion, so we put into operation the familiar military ploy of inventing orders that suited us, then carrying them out.

Thus we announced that we were to move onto *Canberra,* and made the appropriate arrangements. Bob Harmes knew the Purser's staff on board from his trip south, friendships he'd nurtured every one of the three times he'd passed through *Canberra* as a survivor of the three ships that had sunk while he'd been on board. (Ship's survivors were processed through *Canberra* before returning to the UK.)

And so when we arrived on *Canberra* with our gear, Bob was able to get our names firmly printed into the ship's manifest. Through his Purser friend, we were allocated our own enclave – cabins in 'Canterbury Court', a private cul-de-sac used normally to house the Purser's staff: cabins with double beds, showers and loos, desks and radios.

Unfortunately, when we attempted occupation, the cabins were already filled by others like us, who'd eased themselves aboard and were hoping not to be dislodged. Interestingly, they were more senior to us, and from the headquarters of our own 29 Commando Regiment. Understandably, they were particularly adamant that they were not going to move out.

But sadly (for them), they'd not approached the problem in quite the same underhand, well-organised fashion. While we relaxed in the cosy coffee-annexe at the end of 'our' corridor and waited, Bob Harmes pulled administrational strings at the other end of the ship.

After a few hours' drinking coffee and chatting, the very cross Second-in-Command of 29 Commando Regiment and the other 'squatters' plus luggage were moved out to some other less desirable location, with much understandable gnashing of teeth and complaining at our presumption.

We found ourselves in ridiculous luxury. Disbelieving our good fortune, we kept a low profile and our fingers firmly crossed, lest we too might be evicted.

The first thing I'd been looking forward to doing once I got safely on board, was to go for a run. We'd all become very unfit, having

taken no proper exercise for over a month. The interminable sitting about in wet ditches, smoking the odd cigar to calm the nerves, the occasional bursts of activity and long tiring moves at night laden with ludicrously heavy packs had been wearying and exhausting. The unhealthy diet of constant compo rations – not enough when out in the field, then too much back on ship, fattening up while we could – had further weakened us. We were all mildly ill: digestive systems not functioning properly, with sore feet, backs and knees – and very run down.

I dug into my para bag and found my running gear. Shivering in shorts, I went up to the cold air of *Canberra's* quarter-mile-long promenade deck. She was moored off Port William, and I could see Port Stanley and Beagle Ridge very clearly. There were others doing the same thing, and I started slowly and carefully.

As I trotted round, slowing past the flagpole at the bow and running carefully over the rough bit on the port side where the deck surface had already been destroyed by countless pair of boots during the voyage south, I came across other members of our little unit trotting round as well. At the stern you go through a door into a covered way and around the entrance to the crew's quarters, who by now were very wary about stepping out into the path of the thundering feet. By convention everyone went round the same way, and to avoid disaster, the direction was announced daily, and was altered for variation. As it got dark the deck lights came on, more people came out to run and the pounding of feet became the dominant sound. The process of getting fit again was not enjoyable, but was something positive that we could do.

Apart from running and sleeping, our main post-operational activity was eating in the palatial first-class dining room. The normal luxury-cruise waiters remained in attendance, every day at every meal, each with a group of several tables to manage. They were excellent. As far as they were concerned, you could eat the entire menu with every alternative, plus seconds if you so desired.

We established ourselves at the same table, and discovered we had a particularly wonderful chap as our waiter. I wish I could remember his name. He'd been aboard for the whole of the crisis, coping as his luxury cruise ship became in turn, an *ad hoc* Aldershot military training area, the prime target of the Argentine air force, a forwarding station for sunken sailors en route home to Blighty, and a prison transport for Argie prisoners.

Quite understandably, he found the whole desperate experience a bit difficult to take, and so kept himself going with a nip or several throughout the day. As a result, his memory for food orders was unreliable, especially by the evening. So to keep his diners happy and

avoid embarrassment – and with our support – he brought one of everything for everybody, and if you couldn't manage it, you left it. As far as we could observe, his sense of balance with plates was unaffected – unless he was responsible for the loud crashes heard occasionally from the kitchens. We were also able to work our way through the rather splendid P&O wine list (at modest expense), which was most educational.

We did try quite hard to make best use of the excellent cocktail bar – because it was there and we felt we should. But regrettably, to the chagrin of the bar tenders who were keen to show off their drink-building skills, we were not actually up to it. In the evenings, after a couple of pints, then wine with dinner, I would quietly fade away to the tranquillity of Canterbury Court. My digestive system was distinctly unhappy, so I was laid low, on and off for much of the voyage.

I slipped into a routine of either staying in bed until after lunch then getting up and running – or of getting up for an organised 148 Battery exercise-period, which was available by mutual consent every morning for an hour, going back to bed and re-emerging at teatime for another run, then getting stuck into dinner. Some days I couldn't eat anything at all, and survived on kaolin and morph. I rued the days on Beagle Ridge when, ignoring Nick Allin's disapproval, I hadn't used water-sterilisation tablets.

Over the next few days, other units came aboard and settled in. With a few exceptions they were the bulk of 3 Commando Brigade, most of whom we knew very well. It was a time for reunions, not only with people I hadn't seen since the beginning of Operation Corporate, but with people I hadn't seen for years. There were the inevitable scenes of heartiness on some evenings – often led by the 3 Commado Brigade Air Squadron pilots – drinking around the grand piano, which was very badly played and drowned out by even worse singing. I did not always feel sufficiently enthusiastic for this – it seemed like an Air Force mess in a war film.

But, along with the drinking, there was also a good deal of serious talk – almost constant comparing of experiences and analysis, throughout the voyage back to England. One evening, in the Crow's Nest Bar, we were going through one of these alcohol-fuelled debriefing sessions. Willie McCracken was very loudly decrying the decision on the first night of the main attacks, that artillery fire was withheld in order to surprise the enemy.

But far from enabling the commandos to close safely with the enemy, these 'silent' night attacks left the Argentinians defences intact and able to fight. The British units had then to withdraw, which is a dangerous process at night, to allow artillery fire to be brought down.

But the lesson had been learned. All the subsequent attacks went in preceded by full 'noisy' artillery fire preparation.

Willie was complaining about this, and failing to notice that everyone else had suddenly gone silent, loudly declared that the 'silent attack' policy had been "a completely *criminal* decision…. Completely criminal!"

Into this uneasy silence, a single voice piped up:

"Actually Willie, that was *my* decision…"

Brigadier Julian Thompson had walked up the stairs on the other side of the bar, instigating the sudden silence:

"And," he added. "I have to say that you are absolutely right."

Nobody was quite sure how to react – except Willie:

"Ah Brigadier," he replied. "I'm glad you're here. There's a couple of another things I'd like to discuss with you…."

At this everyone roared with laughter, and Willie bought Brigadier Julian a drink – although it could easily have been the other way round.

The afternoon before we sailed, Major Brian Armitage, with a bad back injury from his serious encounter with an Argie landmine, was flown on board and incarcerated in the sickbay. He looked well enough but was in pain. He couldn't laugh without discomfort and was trying hard not to appear worried about how good a recovery he would make. Brian faced weeks of complete immobility in bed, followed by six weeks in a cylinder of plaster to allow the bones to grow back together. We understood he was concerned about whether all his natural functions might be impaired, so a couple of copies of *Mayfair* magazine were rushed to the Sickbay. The Regiment was gratified when Brian let it be known that he was now one worry less. *Canberra's* own sickbay staff, aided by RAMC and RN medical staff, provided lively and kindly care for the dozen or so wounded who came back with us. We tried to get down to the sickbay every day at different times to see Brian. There always seemed to be a good crowd around his bed and I was more entertained by him I thought, than he by me.

Voluntary PT was at 0830 for an hour: running round the flight deck with a series of exercises and games on the upper decks. Sweaty, in now-ragged t-shirts and dirty shorts, we repaired to the aft concert room where coffee would be served out of an urn, in plastic cups with biscuits. Next door the souvenir shop continued as normal, selling *Canberra* t-shirts, logo'd hats, ashtrays, expensive silk scarves and perfumes. Further along there was a constant queue for the ship's barber, who was fighting a losing battle trying to cut everyone's hair. He was more used to doing expensive ladies' styling than hundreds of

short back and sides.

Looking after Canterbury Court, we were extremely fortunate to have an extremely pretty blonde stewardess, who from time to time brought us tea and cakes in true P&O cruising style. She seemed to like pirates, and was looking forward to a long grape-picking holiday in the South of France. If I'd been thinking straight, I'd have made an immediate offer to drive her down there – but I wasn't, and that's another one of my life's many regretted missed opportunities.

But we had also to write our 'post-operation' reports, which were required to be completed before the ship docked. This was a bore but necessary, and kept us busy and out of trouble.

Everyone had been doing their own thing for some three months. We'd become even more independent than before which, given the nature of our unit, was problematic. It was important that the unit be reintegrated by the time we got home, as the first stage of our 'normalisation'. We could no longer indulge our preferences and idiosyncrasies. This change caused friction. We were also not prepared as a small unit to be inconvenienced by the central organisation of the ship, which started out trying to control aspects of life that didn't really warrant controlling. In short, we were a prickly group of people, very united against the outside world, and also pretty fractious within our own ranks.

Bob Harmes' cabin was directly under the promenade deck along which the running took place. There was a rule that you were not allowed to run before and after certain times. Someone regularly ignored this rule and, to make matters worse, wore boots. I went into Bob's cabin one evening to find him lying on his bed with his pistol in his hand staring intently at the ceiling. "I'm going to get that bugger the next time he comes round."

When *Canberra* finally sailed for the UK, the officer of the watch announced over the tannoy, in the usual P&O cruising style, details of where we would be going and how long it would take. The ship would sail to Ascension Island, where some people would be helicoptered ashore to fly back to the UK by RAF VC10, and where others would be flown on, including an MoD equipment-evaluation team (better late than never we supposed).

But most importantly, there was to be a complete cabaret troupe courtesy of the Combined Services Entertainment organisation. This was rumoured to include a number of female dancers and singers, and so generated lively interest.

*Canberra* was not going to stop at Ascension but press on to UK at best speed, with helicopters flying off and on along the way with, we hoped, a lot of mail. The days were made busy with various jobs and diversions, but as all we wanted to do was get home, the voyage

dragged.

Every night there'd be figures leaning philosophically on the rail watching the wake, ignoring others carrying sacks, who surreptitiously threw things into the water. The inevitable clamp down on 'gizzets' was still producing Colt 45s, grenades, overlooked ammunition (I discovered a full pistol-magazine in the bottom of my bergen the night before we docked) and other dubious things that people were quietly lobbing into the waves.

Our thoughts, as we sailed north into the tropics, past Ascension Island and back into the known world, were focused on returning home. But there was also the realisation of a unique experience which we'd survived that was suddenly coming to an end. We were professional soldiers, and regarded what we'd done as a job for which we'd trained, which, because it's what we always did, was therefore nothing out of the ordinary.

As far as we were concerned, the Falklands were now somebody else's problem. Having spent so many long hours thinking through difficult problems and carrying out our operations, we gave no further thought to the Islands, their inhabitants, or the troops that were now being sent in as the protective garrison.

But of course, it's the aftermath of every war that presents the biggest problems. How to rebuild after the mayhem, and avoid the same thing happening again? There were also serious issues facing units who'd been involved in the various disasters of the campaign, the greatest being the so-called 'Bluff Cove' bombing of the Welsh Guards, which in fact took place in the Fitzroy Roads.

My own disaster with the killing of the three Falkland women, apart from Colonel Keith Eve telling me how badly the house had been damaged, and Battery Sergeant Major Jock Malcolm telling me what had happened on the ship, was never mentioned again, and I don't know to what extent other people were aware that I was responsible. So although the aftermath of this terrible tragedy seemed as though it would not require me to endure a Board of Enquiry or any other sort of investigation (at least nothing of which I was aware), the same was not going to be true for others.

# Chapter 12. Home

C*anberra* made her landfall with the coast of England off the Royal Naval Air Station of Culdrose in Cornwall. Sea King helicopters from the base flew out to the ship bringing various people, like 29 Commando Regiment's Commanding Officer Lt Colonel Mike Holroyd Smith – 'HS', who'd flown back to the UK from Ascension. Several of the newsmen who had gone down to the Falklands on *Canberra* were flown on too, bringing videos of news footage they had taken to show us.

We assembled in *Canberra's* William Fawcett Room to hear from HS of the arrangements for the disembarkation on the morrow. He had some well-chosen words to say to us:

> "There's going to be a welcome for us at Southampton as you never saw before – certainly nothing like it since the end of the Second World War. I know for certain that several of you are being met by parents and girlfriends, and I'll give those people details afterwards.
>
> You should be aware that the folks at home have been under a very great strain, far more than you realise, and in many ways a greater strain than we've been under. I arrived home last week, having flown from Ascension, and found my family looking very drawn and tired. You will have to be careful and aware with your families, and go easy on them because they've been through a lot of worry.
>
> We've got coaches coming down from Poole with your families aboard. Those not actually being met can travel to Poole on these coaches, but of course you are free to do what you like.
>
> I understand that several hotels in the city are offering free rooms, dinners, etc for us and I've got the list here.
>
> Unfortunately, I'm going to have to ask you all to come back to work on Monday morning. There's an awful lot to do – as I'm sure you realise, and I want to get it done next week so we can get away on leave. Although we haven't worked it all out yet, you should get at least six weeks.
>
> I would also ask you to go carefully with the blokes who didn't come down with us. They will be feeling very left out of things. Just remember it wasn't their fault that they didn't come along, and they're just as good as you lot, but haven't got the tales to tell."

My parents were coming down to Southampton to meet me. All the arrangements had been made by the 148 Battery rear party, who'd been doing an excellent job keeping everyone informed, and had organised the coaches to bring the families down to the dockside. They'd also been covering all our normal work and training commitments as best they could, in our absence.

The atmosphere in *Canberra* was expectant and pent-up. We wanted to get home to resume our normal lives from where they'd been interrupted at the end of March. Each day since the surrender had been endured as an inevitable delay to getting back home. The idea of a huge welcome was fine, provided it didn't hold us back from going on leave. Rumours of a big parade filled us with gloom, with all the rehearsals and inevitable preparation for something in which none of us was remotely interested.

In spite of these cynical thoughts, the welcome – its scale, warmth and emotion – took us all completely by surprise. We were stunned, some of us into silence and retrospection.

Someone murmured a snippet of that bitter Kipling poem: "It's Tommy this an' Tommy that an' "Chuck 'im out the brute!" but it's "Saviour of 'is country" when the guns begin to shoot;' for we felt that we had really only gone off, as many times before, done our job as best we could, and were now, very thankfully, coming back to our homeland. Why on this particular occasion should we be given such a tumultuous welcome?

Fighting the war meant missing all but a few of the vast amount of news films and documentaries that had been broadcast in our absence. We did not understand the scale of Operation Corporate or the national feeling that had been generated at home by it. We'd developed a sort of tunnel vision – probably as a defence mechanism to get us through. The extraordinary welcome transformed this blinkered myopia into a blaze of full-colour, 3-D glory.

The Sea King helicopters took off and returned to Culdrose, and then, in the violet evening mist, the coast of Cornwall first became visible. The officer of the watch piped the news to the whole ship, the one pipe no one minded being disturbed by. The rails on the port side of *Canberra* were crowded as we watched the distant coastline grow out of the pale evening light.

My thoughts were a peculiar mixture of contentment, melancholy, anticipation and impatience. I felt rather sad at the ending, but thankful it was all over safely for us. There was also sadness and reflection, about the friends who would not be coming back and the futility of sudden death. This sadness and reflection sometimes returns

to haunt me now.

The rugged coastline was pale and ethereal in the summer mist, the stuff of all the dreams we'd never dared to allow ourselves. I thought at first we were off the southern tip of the Lizard, then realised I was looking at Carrick Roads. After an hour of gazing and thinking and talking quietly, I went below for a shower, before a special dinner from P&O on, to show us a little of their normal cruising style.

Our last night on *Canberra* started with a Royal Marine Band concert on the games deck: marches, pop songs and classical favourites while the south coast of England slipped past. In spite of the gathering dusk, small boats came out from the seaside resorts as we passed, foghorns hooting, holidaymakers waving. As streetlights ashore came on, parked cars on the cliffs and beaches flashed their headlights at us. At some places this headlight-flashing was in unison, presumably orchestrated by a local radio station. It seemed that at last we had made it – and in *Canberra* too, just as Steve Hoyland had fantasised in our cold, wet LUP (Lying Up Position) just a few weeks earlier.

After the sumptuous P&O dinner, we had a party in Colonel Keith Eve's cabin. I, quite rightly, got a hard time from Mike HS, for the length of my hair and general scruffiness. In view of the media attention likely on the morrow, I was not at my most presentable. I remember being ruefully aware that we were coming back to military normality. But we'd hijacked Sally, the very pretty girl singer who was part of the CSE troupe which embarked at Ascension, who we 'protected' from the would-be depredations of the helicopter pilots, in a spare Canterbury Court cabin. Sally had scissors and a comb, and took me off for a much-needed haircut, her subsequent ministrations preventing me from brooding over the unfairness of military life.

The next morning, thick heads and furred tongues were widespread. Great inroads had been made into a cache of whisky put to one side for the purpose over the last three weeks. We were, however, up in good time to hand over our bedding and pack our kit. *Canberra* was now steaming closer to the shore, passing the ports and resorts of Dorset, the low sand dunes of Studland and the entrance to Poole Harbour – our home base. Although early in the morning, several welcoming craft were sailing beside us.

The 'gentlemen of the press' had somehow got on board to report our arrival, materialising at our last breakfast on *Canberra*. These were not the journalists who'd sailed south in the very beginnings of the conflict, but a different breed. They had their own table, and were scruffy and tousled-looking, remonstrating with their waiter about

some omission. The meal was free and they were interlopers. Their waiter, to whom they were giving the hard time, had spent two months in the largest floating target in the world, and he now had the misfortune to be serving them on his last morning.

One female reporter was dark and attractive, but at this moment also very rumpled and grumpy-looking. She smoked cigarettes at breakfast while all around her were eating, stubbing out the ends in the remains of her food as there were no ashtrays provided in the dining-room, with its 'No-Smoking' signs.

There were radio and TV interviews going on in most corners of the ship. People were being buttonholed at every step by pencil-poised journalists. Willie McCracken wore a vest with 'Exclusive Interviews Here' written on it. The responses they were eliciting were clearly not useful, so eventually their enthusiasm waned.

All sorts of arrangements were being made. The Prince of Wales, we hoped not dressed as an admiral or wearing a red beret and parachute wings, was to fly aboard to meet us – or at least an unrepresentative selection of whoever might be deemed presentable, then leave before we docked so as not to upstage our welcome. The troupe of entertainers was to be paraded up near the bridge to sing along with the Royal Marine band. (I had visions of 'Land of Hope and Glory' ad nauseam, but they played the pop songs and tunes that we'd enjoyed at their concerts.) They were however to be overwhelmed at the last, by an endless phalanx of other military bands playing different tunes deployed around *Canberra's* terminal – well and truly proving the American observation that Britain's' armed forces are 'all bands and admirals'.

As *Canberra* entered the channel between the mainland and the Isle of Wight, yet more pleasure-craft appeared alongside to follow us in. It was turning into a perfect summer's day, a little misty but sunny, clear and warm. Some of the craft were slow and could only just keep up, others went racing round the ship hooting and waving: expensive gin palaces, and small family boats pottering along.

As the channel narrowed and the sea room decreased, the craft became concentrated and were sometimes virtually touching. Fire service tugs pumped plumes of water a hundred feet into the air, drenching boats to lee of them. One chap in a gin palace kept coming in very close to throw cans of cold beer and lager up to the troops lining the rails above him, most of which fell into the sea. There were welcoming banners everywhere, some with people's names, others simply 'To the Task Force'.

Rail-space on the ship had been allocated according to units – very military but sensible. The rails were packed with waving,

shouting, very happy soldiers. Any boat that came by with women on board was subjected to good-natured cries of "Get your kit off!" One of the gin palaces had two blonde models displayed on its bow so when it came by these cries were deafening – likely a newspaper going for the obvious picture. But whether cued or not, these two ladies took their t-shirts off to display shapely charms.

This same performance was repeated with various boats several times, and seemed to catch on. Being sporting and gentlemanly (as we were), nobody was so rude and chauvinistic as to invite only the curvaceous blondes to "get their kit off". There must be some sort of hormone reaction about hundreds of men shouting "Get your kit off" which is irresistible to females, for every boat with women on board eventually followed suit, even several with ladies who'd seemed too respectable and sensible for this sort of thing.

Somewhat upstaged by this development, the gin palace with the blondes came by again and took off *all* their clothes, to great whoops and whistles of delight.

I noted one particular boat with two particularly prim ladies who'd seemed destined to be the exception that disproved my theory. However later that week, when walking through Southampton I noticed their boat pictured on a display board outside a local newspaper office, with these two standing at the bow as naked as the day they were born – a Paulean 'conversion' which must have taken place on the other side of the ship.

On every bit of hard standing, cars were parked with people waving. All the many piers and jetties were packed, banners everywhere, Union Flags on virtually every craft. *Canberra* had to slow down to avoid swamping these escorts. When craft broke down, other boats took them in tow, or took on the occupants. Every ship we passed hooted, and *Canberra* hooted in reply.

As we came round the final few bends in the river, it was impossible to tell where our berth was to be because every bit of jetty and standing was completely crammed with well-wishers waving flags. I kept anticipating the terminal, but as we swept onwards I wondered if we should ever get there. The clue was given when finally a team of tugs moved toward us from the starboard side and formed up to port to push us in.

The P&O terminal was totally packed, several bands on the quay, every roof occupied, and the huge embarkment sheds crammed with relatives. They'd organised our families in groups according to unit, so we could find the friendly faces amid a sea of smiles and waves. These groups were easy to locate as the banners being held up were much more specific and personal. One very well-endowed and shapely lady was quick to reveal all from the terminal roof. We had, I suppose,

become adept at encouraging this commendable and public-spirited activity.

I scanned the crowd with my binoculars but could see no one, until someone came down from the bow to tell me they'd seen a banner saying 'Hugh McManners 148'. When I went down there and pushed through to a place on the rail, there was my sister Helen wearing a 'DeeDee Bobbler' head thing with springs and green stars that bounced up and down. She struggled off through the crowd to bring my parents and younger sister Ann. We could do no more than shout the odd remark and wave, and it was lovely to see them again.

Once *Canberra* had tied up alongside and the gangplanks went down, there was quite a long and frustrating wait. By tradition and for the benefit of the media, our brigadier, Julian Thompson, went off first, with the COs of the Commandos and Regiments. The units then disembarked in order, according to a schedule designed to avoid an interminable crush at the single gangplank. We retired to Canterbury Court and drank a bottle of wine.

When our time finally came several hours later and we were called forward over the tannoy, we discovered the rest of the boys had snuck off early. The crowd, which had been clapping ecstatically for several hours, also clapped us off and we were back on terra firma, in England, three and a half months after leaving.

The bands played and the crowd clapped and cheered, and hopefully life was going to become normal and we could forget the military for a while. A huge dog leapt out of the crowd on to Captain Nigel Bedford, licking him furiously, delirious with delight.

It turned into a dream. Our quartermaster, Staff Sergeant Ivor Pothin, was on the quayside with a lorry to load our kit and take it back to Poole, so all I had to do was put a toothbrush and razor into the pockets of the brand-new combat kit that had replaced my ragged Falklands gear.

Reunited with parents and family, we walked up the road past smiling, nodding policemen and hundreds of parked cars. I was at last away from warships, soldiers and the military, although I had no civilian clothes or money, and nothing but the combat kit I was wearing.

But the nightmare continued for my parents. Peter, my younger brother, a troop commander in 9 Parachute Engineer Squadron, remained in the Falklands, clearing minefields which the Argies had not mapped, in contravention of International Law. These clearance operations were to claim yet more lives.

We'd been miraculously lucky. Our only casualty had been

Sergeant John Rycroft, on whose head the neon light had fallen during the air raid that so nearly killed Brigadier Julian and his commanding officers. His 'band-aid' was now off.

However, we did not escape without tragedy. Back at Poole, during the fighting, our MT (Motor Transport) Sergeant 'Scouse' Graham, a very fit, modest and capable man who excelled as a marathon runner, had been taken suddenly ill with a rare form of lung cancer, and died.

Our motivation when we were doing the fighting was very much simpler than the arguments that raged at the time, and which no doubt will continue. We did it for each other.

In my team we each did our best, and were mortified when we made mistakes, and tried to be cheerful when we felt like giving up. We chaffed each other when we were miserable, and joked when we were wondering if we could carry on. We hid our fears, just as we showed them to each other so as to share them. We also shared our letters when the postman had left one of us out.

We did what was needed as firmly as we were able, so it could be finished quickly and we could get back home to our families and friends. I don't know how I'd have felt if one of my team had been hurt or killed. We were so lucky to have been spared that pain. We would certainly have carried on with the job, if only for the one that was no longer with us.

Most soldiers believe that whatever's going on, they will not be the one to get hurt or killed. When others are killed they short-circuit the worry is by saying "If it's got your name written on it, then no matter what you do, it's going to get you". This optimistic fatalism is the only way to avoid becoming convinced of the inevitability of death, or worse – mutilation. It would be an impossibly brave man who carried on convinced he was not going to survive.

I suspect that such things as shell shock occur when the resilience of the individual has been taken too far so his optimism is destroyed. It's probably this which makes you unable to carry on, and so with your sense of purpose destroyed, there's no point in any of it, and so you crack. Des Nixon used to mutter to himself: "I'm a rubber duck and you can't crack me", and he was right.

I was however uneasy about one thing, a very secret thought which came to me unbidden – that it had all been too easy….

This sounds strange, and at the time, I felt it was a very strange thing to be thinking.

Throughout basic training, combat is portrayed as an impossibly difficult, dangerous and arduous thing, and yet I'd emerged in one piece. My underlying emotion was guilt: that it hadn't been as hard as

I'd thought it should have been.

*The Army Staff College,*

*Camberley, Surrey, 1984*

Thus ends the first edition of *Falklands Commando* – the version that led so many people to join the Armed Forces.

I intend to offer a further book, along the lines of *Falklands Commando 30 Years On* as catharsis and comfort to the many veterans who've been through similar experiences.

# Extract from the forthcoming sequel to *Falklands Commando*

In July 1982, back in UK, after the report-writing, equipment-servicing, re-packing, a profusion of parties, then home leave in Cornwall, I was posted away from 148 Commando Forward Observation Battery and the Special Boat Squadron at Royal Marines Poole, to become a junior staff officer in London.

I was a small cog in the outer office of the Chief and Vice Chiefs of the General Staff in the Ministry of Defence's Main Building, Whitehall. There could probably be no change of job quite so mind-bendingly different in any profession, let alone the Army.

I tried to persuade myself this was a welcome progression. I took up lodgings and a London social life, and got on with it.

But I wasn't very good at Whitehall etiquette, in the monolithic, scruffy, cavernous Main Building. Also, I was surrounded by the same civil servants and brass hats as had been there before and during the war. When they realised I'd been 'down south' as they put it, they become impenetrably reticent, as if they knew things I didn't. (Which I later realised was exactly the case.)

The long hours and stressful tedium were greatly relieved by my boss, the delightfully witty, razor-sharp Old Etonian Lt General Sir Thomas Morony, who in the usual Army manner, I addressed as 'General Tim'. I was officially termed the 'Assistant Military Assistant' to the Vice-Chief of the General Staff or 'AMA to VCGS'. When I pretended to complain to General Tim at being the 'assistant, assistant to the overall assistant' he accepted the joke.

Whilst in London, I bumped into various 3 Commando Brigade chums who'd been co-opted onto an Army presentation team, set up to travel round bases in the UK and Germany recounting what the Army had done in the Falklands. They were less than happy with the military politics of this jamboree: for example, telling me of pressure being applied by the influential hierarchy of the Welsh Guards in relation to how the Welsh Guard's contributions to the war effort were to be presented.

Brigadier David Ramsbotham was the Director of Army Public Relations, and was a regular caller on the Vice Chief – so I came to know him well. He described to me the Army's difficulties with us returning Falkland 'heroes':

> "Many senior Army officers were extremely concerned that the Paras were going to claim all the glory, and were

very angry when Max Hastings wrote an article in the Evening Standard saying that the 'crap hat' Welsh Guards and Scots Guards had been useless. We decided this kind of thing had to be stopped.

The CGS Dwin Brammell flew out to Ascension to see the Paras before they were flown home, to tell them face-to-face that they must remember others had also been involved, and not to run them down. It did appear to some people that more was being said about others who hadn't done as much – but this was to counterbalance the idea that the Paras were hogging everything.

I wanted to make sure the Army's part in the war was fully told, so before the fighting units left the Islands and their memories faded, I'd got every Commanding Officer to mark on a map where they'd been. I also spoke with each, then after returning to the UK, published a booklet giving the story of each unit – right down to the Army Physical Training Corps. Then, when all the units had returned to UK, an Army Presentation team was organised, to travel round, ensuring that everyone in the Army and many retired people too, heard first-hand what had happened."

General Tim asked me to proof-read this booklet, a totally Army-oriented glossy production which reminded people that over half the troops that fought in the Falklands had been Army. This was a fair intention – public understanding of who'd done the fighting hadn't extended much beyond being told the Royal Marines were part of the Navy, and television footage of grey warships.

But predictably, the brochure's publication enraged the Navy. The First Sea Lord protested to the Secretary of State for Defence. An angry phone call from the Ministers' outer office caused General Tim literally to have to run down the corridor, trailed by me having paused in the scramble to snatch up a dozen copies of the offending booklet.

General Tim was his usual urbane, civilised, amusing self. The Secretary of State was eventually mollified and the booklet published, to Royal Naval chagrin that they hadn't thought of the idea first. I reflected that working like hell to become a three-star general only to have to run down corridors at the behest of over-reacting ministers, was not for me, even in the unlikely event of them thinking me good enough.

I lodged in the spare room of a somewhat dysfunctional family in the trendy, expensive part of Islington. The husband was an edgy

media type who seemed to keep himself as much out of the family home as he could. His wife had been something in the media herself, but now blousy and anxious about whatever her husband was getting up to, was rushed off her feet with the pressures of au pairs, children and funky London life. The husband seemed very grumpy. I soon realised he regarded me as a threat. I kept myself as separate as I could from all this, getting up early to run to work, going to Cornwall at weekends, directly from the MoD.

The Falklands War was *the* fashionable topic of conversation, but thanks to media coverage, people were astonishingly ill-informed. Once my involvement became known, I felt obliged to answer the inevitable questions. But it was wearing, especially when even the most otherwise sophisticated people were crass enough to ask "Did you kill anybody?" This was a regular dinner party question. At one late night soiree, after my polite disinclination to answer had been ignored several times, with some irritation I finally snapped back by asking one particularly persistent woman whether she preferred it doggy-fashion or missionary style – to general outrage. A man with a brother in the Army understood my point and told everyone to back off.

But I could see the reason for the question: at that time, most people had never met anybody of their own generation who'd fought in a war. Fathers who fought in the Second World War or Korea were somehow different, and in any case did not talk of the numbers of German, Italians or North Koreans they'd killed. I was a distinct oddity.

Had I answered "Yes" to the loaded question, I knew that to anybody apart from fellow war veterans, I would be demoted onto a very different moral plane, as a person their sort never meet – a killer, to be seen through the eyes of these inexperienced but avariciously curious North London *fashionista* as less than human. In my case, I'd killed rather a lot of people, plus there was the matter of the tragic deaths of the three Falkland women to somehow come to terms with…

But their Sunday-supplement conjecture about the morals, causes and outcomes of the war was nothing more than a smart form of entertainment for otherwise bored people. The final straw for me occurred when the troubled wife with whom I lodged, lined me up for a dinner party she was giving for a collection of writers, poets and a notable playwright, where clearly I was to be the star attraction. I gave immediate notice, but as I was moving my stuff out three weeks later, just before the dinner party, the wife descended on me with a wide variety of threats and inducements to stay for that night. The playwright was developing something for Channel Four about the

funeral of 2 Para's Colonel 'H' Jones, and was '*desperate'* to talk with me. I was out of there, but to avoid a scene with the wife I agreed to go to the pub with this man.

I tried to get this guy to understand what the various points of view at this imaginary funeral were likely to be. But the actual facts of what had really happened were of no interest to him: 'H' Jones had been buried soon after the Goose Green battle as one of 2 Para's 17 dead, in a large bull-dozed trench in the wet peat of San Carlos. To my increasing annoyance, I realised that he'd dreamed up an appalling barracks drama back in the UK, with drunken soldiers fighting each other, violent antipathy between the officers and other ranks, and so on… My suggestions accorded neither with his imaginings, nor the inevitable anti-war, anti-Thatcher perspective required of such a play in order to be televised. He was fishing for details to lend authenticity to his own preconceptions rather than seeking genuine insight, so I drank my pint and left, wishing I hadn't bothered.

So when my family suggested I might write a book about my adventures, I took the idea as an opportunity to tell the whole story as it really was, which might also save me from having continually to explain. But more importantly, so I could present an accurate picture of what it was really like, for all these people whose ignorance was so shaped by media nonsense.

Director of Army Public Relations Brigadier David Ramsbotham would have to clear such a book before it could be published, but being about Special Forces operations, would it not be banned?

I already knew Brigadier Ramsbotham was a man worth talking to: General Tim was his senior reporting officer and I'd proof read his latest Confidential Report. Brigadier Ramsbotham's Civil Service bosses had been very much less than complimentary, and I'd been struck by the dramatic economy of my boss's pen picture contradiction: "Doves which spend their days contentedly saying 'Too-roo Too-roo' to each other, do not appreciate the sudden arrival of a cat which upsets their comfortable lives and gets things done."

Brigadier David was a regular caller on General Tim, so with some trepidation I asked him privately if I might write a book. His response was unequivocal: "If only you would. We'd love to see something by a soldier to counter all these books being rushed out by journalists. What you did was history, so write about it. Give it to me and I'll get it cleared."

I was also greatly encouraged in this alarming project by General Tim who, when I finally finished the writing, read my first draft on one of his rare weekends off. (I predict incredulity from military officers with MoD experience.)

**Brigadier David Ramsbotham:**

> "Fewer and fewer people now have experience, let alone understanding, of real, full-on war, which nevertheless remains a subject of endless fascination, hence the continued popularity of films, TV programmes, books and comic strips. One of the reasons I encouraged Hugh McManners to write *Falklands Commando*, was that he wanted to tell things as they were rather than hide behind bland innuendo. I wanted the public to be exposed to the real thing, not dramatised but honestly described, to counter-balance this diet of sensation and unreality with which the British public was otherwise being bombarded by the media. But most of this is so far removed from reality as to distort the understanding of what it's really like to be in action, when one's life and the lives of one's comrades-in-arms, are at risk."

After a couple of months working in the MoD, with my book-writing underway, one Friday afternoon I was summoned across the corridor to General Tim's office to be told I'd been awarded a Mention in Despatches (MiD), the UK's lowest level of gallantry award. I was stunned, as I truly felt I didn't deserve anything like this.

Then came a flood of official letters of congratulation, some of which I found irritating as they were so obviously routine. I wrote personal replies to all except one that I found too unbearably platitudinous. I suspect that some of my replies would have been oddly received, in particular the one I recall writing to the Director Royal Artillery about the technicalities of shelling Argentine artillery batteries and killing their gun crews.

Later, I was summoned to the office of his successor Major General Brian Pennicott, a previous CO of 29 Commando, who'd commanded all the artillery in the Falklands and I knew very well. He confided to me that I'd been recommended for a Military Cross, but that because 148 Battery was so small, there was a quota and only the one could be awarded (as rightly it had been, to fellow NGSFO team leader Captain Willie McCracken). This disoriented me, and I probably reacted strangely to General Brian, because I just could not see how I personally might have deserved that level of recognition.

I did nevertheless feel very proud that FO1's team effort had been recognised through my MiD, and wrote each to Nick, Des, Steve and Tim along those lines. However later, I realised this is what everybody does, which made me feel even more fraudulent.

I was working very hard: running into the MoD from my new lodgings in Stockwell, doing an exercise session in the gym, then changing into my pinstripe suit to be behind the desk for 7am to get things ready for when the Military Assistant Lt Colonel Tony Piggot

and General Tim arrived. I usually ran home around twelve hours later, and after a shower and supper, settled down to work on my diary – which was to become the *Falklands Commando* manuscript. I found this cathartic and relaxing.

And so we leave the young Captain McManners working all hours for five days a week in Whitehall, then departing as soon as he could on Fridays to his bolthole in St Agnes on the north coast of Cornwall.

I hope you will wish to continue reading my next autobiographical volume.

I'm now writing it, while trying to come to terms with the uncomfortable level of self-exposure publication will entail.

But this will tell a story that many others have also experienced, of the aftermath of war. In my version of this story, you will read of counter-terrorist work in Northern Ireland, high altitude mountaineering in the Chinese Karakoram, then via a High Court case and other twists and turns, to the establishment of a medical research foundation at the University of Oxford, focussed on the psychological and neurological problems suffered by war veterans.

You will also read of the gradual emergence of understanding of these problems, and the herculean struggles of war veterans to come to terms with surviving war then coping with the peace.

A story of suffering, but also of hope. I'm very grateful to you for reading this far. I hope you will continue…

# Falklands War Outline Chronology of Events

**1 April**

Rumours start concerning an invasion of the Falkland Islands.

148 Battery recalled from leave.

Warning Order for operations issued.

**2 April**

Argentina invades the Falkland Islands.

**4 April**

RFA *Sir Percivale* sails from Marchwood.

**5 April**

*Hermes/Invincible* carrier group sails from Portsmouth, preceded by *Fearless*.

**9 April**

3 Commando Brigade sails on board *Canberra*.

**10 April**

Former US General and President Reagan's' Secretary of State Alexander Haig arrives in Buenos Aires, from London.

**12 April**

A Maritime Exclusion Zone comes into operation around Falkland Islands.

**15 April**

Royal Navy destroyer group arrives on station in mid-Atlantic (a submarine is already on station in the area of the Falklands).

**17 April**

Naval and land force planning conferences held at Ascension.

Alexander Haig returns to Buenos Aires, after visits to London and Washington.

**18 April**

Argentine aircraft-carrier *25 Mayo* returns to port for repairs.

**22 April**

British Foreign Secretary Francis Pym to Washington.

**24 April**

Admiral Woodward's naval task group arrives in the South Atlantic and RVs with the destroyer group.

**25 April**

South Georgia recaptured by an *ad hoc* British force using 148 Battery-directed naval gunfire.

**29 April**

The British Task force arrives at the edge of the Exclusion Zone.

**30 April**

The Total Exclusion Zone around the Falklands comes in force.

President Reagan promises US support for Britain.

**1 May**

An initial 'Black Buck' Vulcan bombing raid on Port Stanley airfield, followed by Harrier and naval gunfire attacks.

**2 May**

Argentine cruiser *General Belgrano* sunk.

**4 May**

HMS *Sheffield* sunk. The first Sea Harrier shot down.

**7 May**

Total Exclusion Zone extended to 12 miles from the Argentine coast.

**12 May**

*QE2* sails from Southampton with 5 Infantry Brigade (including Lt P.J. McManners RE) on board.

**14 May**

The SAS destroy aircraft at Pebble Island using 148 Battery-directed naval gunfire.

**18 May**

The Landing Force ships RV with the Task Group, north-east of Falklands.

**19 May**

The British War Cabinet gives the order to land in the Falklands.

**21 May**

British landings at San Carlos begin.

*Ardent* sunk.

**23 May**

*Antelope* sunk.

**25 May**

*Coventry* and *Atlantic Conveyor* sunk.

**27 May**

The Land Force starts moving from the landing area: Special Forces move inland, the SAS to Mount Kent and the SBS to the north-west, while 3 Para and 45 Commando begin the long march toward Teal Inlet. 2 Para march toward Goose Green.

**28 May**

2 Para fight and win at Darwin and Goose Green.

5 Infantry Brigade cross-deck from *QE2* onto the *Canberra* at South Georgia.

**31 May**

42 Commando helicoptered onto Mount Kent.

**1 June**

5 Infantry Brigade begin disembarkation at San Carlos.

**2 June**

2 Para move east to Bluff Cove.

**8 June**

RFAs *Sir Galahad* and *Sir Tristram* bombed at Bluff Cove – putting the Welsh Guards out of action.

**11 June**

The main battle for Stanley begins.

**14 June**

Argentine land forces surrender.

# Glossary

**AA** Anti-aircraft

**ADC (Aide-de camp)** Personal staff officer

**AGI** Amphibious Gatherer Intelligence (ship)

**AOO** Amphibious Operations Officer

**AOR** Amphibious Operations Room

**AP** Armour Piercing

**ASD** Anti-Submarine Duties

**Avgas** Aviation Gasoline

**BAOR** British Army of the Rhine

**Basha** Small hide area with poncho roof, where one or two soldiers live (more correctly a jungle version, but a general usage)

**Bear** Russian high altitude reconnaissance aircraft

**Bergen (also Bergen rucksack)** A large military rucksack back-pack with side pouches, made of waterproof material

**Binos** binoculars *(abbrev)*

**Biscuits AB** ships style hard compo biscuits

**Bite** (as a fish to bait) A positive reaction to a provocative comment, which may lead to the commentator being 'goffa'd' *(qv)*

**Bivvie** (from bivouac) See basha

**Blowpipe** Light shoulder launched point defence air defence missile

**BMA** Brigade Maintenance Area (mountains of stores, vehicles and a hive of activity)

**Bombardier**A Royal Artillery soldier holding rank of corporal

**Bluey** Small portable cooker

**Brew a wet** Make tea, coffee or similar hot drink (*qv*)

**Brick** A man and his oppo (*qv*)

**Burma Road** Main passage through a ship

**Buzz** Rumour (a gen buzz)

**C130 (Hercules)** Heavy-lift transport aircraft, used by us and the Argentinians

**Cache** Hidden supply of ammunition, food, batteries *et al*

**Cam cream** Black camouflage cream, said to be very good for the complexion, to cam out or cam up with foliage

**CAP** Combat Air Patrol (Cap); Harriers

**Casevac** Casualty Evacuation

**Chaff** Tin foil, used as a decoy on enemy radar screens

**Chairman Mao Suit** Quilted Arctic jacket and trousers

**Chatelaine** Smaller hand-held thermal imager (TI)

**COMAW** Commodore Amphibious Warfare (Commodore Mike Clapp)

**Commando Snake** Single-file line of soldiers moving at night

**Comms** Communications *(abbrev)*

**Compo** Combat rations (See rats)

**Container** Contraption of straps and clips with which a paratrooper jumps with his weapon and equipment secured to his body. (He releases it in the air once his parachute has safely opened and it drops below him, attached by a 15-foot rope to his harness). See also *CSPEP*

**CPO** Chief Petty Officer

**CSPEP** Carry Straps Parachutist Equipment (See Container)

**CW** Carrier Wave, used to transmit morse code

**DF** Defensive Fire or Direction Finding, depending on context

**DLG** Destroyer Light Guided

**DPMs** Disrupted Pattern Material, camouflage cotton uniforms

**Drop Zones** Area of ground suitable for dropping paratroops

**First field dressing** Vacuum-packed shell dressing with yards of crêpe bandage, for initial wound treatment

**Fives M**easurement of satisfactory radio communications

**Flick V**erb meaning rapidly to change radio frequency. Can also be a noun referring to the quartermaster's file in which people sign when they become responsible for equipment – as "it's on my flick"

**Flyco** Flying Command running flying operations on a ship

**FO team** Shortened version of NGFO team, Naval Gunfire Forward Observation team (also FO1, NGFO Team Number 1).

**FOO** Forward Observation Officer (Artillery)

**FPB** Fast Patrol Boat

**Gizzet** Spoil of war (from "Give us that…")

**Goffa** Bread roll, large (sea) wave, or a punch (To be goffa'd is to be hit by a wave or a punch)

**GPMG** General Purpose Machine-Gun, 7.62 mm

**GPMG (SF)** GPMG in the sustained-fire role, on a tripod firing on fixed lines

**Green slug** Sleeping bag (or maggot)

**Gunner** Royal Artillery private soldier (also the generic term for members of the Royal Artillery)

**Hard** Area of hard standing used to beach sea craft

**Harry** Peculiar naval word added to anything to give emphasis (e.g. Last night I was 'harry crappers' meaning "I was very under the influence of alcohol")

**Harry Maskers** Black plastic masking tape used for everything (one item without which military operations would grind to a halt)

**HDS** (see **SDS**) Helicopter Delivery Service

**Heavy weapons** Artillery guns, anti-tank guns, 130-mm mortars

**Helo** helicopter *(abbrev)*

**Hercules** See C130

**Hexxy** Hexamine, tablets that burn to heat food

**HF** High Frequency Radio

**HLS** Helicopter Landing Site

**Jack or Jolly Jack** Slang term for a sailor (Jolly Jack Tar)

**Kelp** Thick belts of seaweed that clog many Falkland inlets

**KMs** kilometres *(abbrev)*

**LAW** Light Anti-Tank Weapon, 66-mm rocket launcher

**LCM** Landing Craft Mechanised

**LCU** Landing Crafy Utility

**Light Gun** 105-mm artillery gun used by Commando, parachute and 'light' field artillery

**LPD** Landing Platform Dock (HMS *Fearless* and *Intrepid*)

**LRO** RN rank, Leading Radio Operator

**LS** (helicopter) Landing Site

**Lynx** naval helicopter

**MASH** US army term for Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (also name of comedy film about Korean War)

**MDS** Main Dressing Station, field hospital with rudimentary surgical facilities

**MT** Motor Transport

**Nav Bag** Navigation bag; carried by aviators

**NCO** Non-Commissioned Officer

**NGS** Naval Gunfire Support

**Nimrod** Long-range RAF reconnaissance aircraft based on the old Comet jet aircraft

**NOD** Night Observation Device

**NP8901** Naval Party number 8901, garrisoned in the Falklands before the Argentine invasion

**Nutty** Confectionery (as in nutty locker)

**OC** Officer Commanding

**OGs** Olive Green lightweight trousers

**Once-only Suit** Bright orange immersion suits to keep dry after abandoning ship (hopefully used once and discarded)

**OP** Observation Post; Observation Position

**Oppo partner** Everyone is paired up with a partner, and on operations they always stay close to each other (See Brick)

**Orbat** Order of Battle

**P Company** Parachute selection company; four gruelling weeks of long marches, assault courses and runs carrying heavy equipment and loads, to select soldiers for service with airborne forces

**Pipe** Tannoy announcement on a ship

**Pluto wave** Exercise to strengthen arms, shoulders and back; peculiar movements required, reminiscent of canine olfactory

investigation

**PNG** Passive Night Goggles

**PO** Royal Navy Petty Officer

**POL** Petrol, Oil and Lubricants

**Poncho** Rectangular waterproof poncho, with hood for use as a raincoat; more commonly used as lightweight overhead shelter, stretched tightly over a trench or a hide

**PoWs or PWs** Prisoners of War

**PT** Physical Training

**Proximity fuses** See VT

**Puri tabs** Water purifying tablets

**Pusser** Purser, term for anything official, e.g. pusser's issue rum – also known as the 'tot'

**PWO** Principal Warfare Officer

**RALONGS** Royal Artillery Liason Officer Naval Gunfire Support (Lt.-Colonel Eve)

**Rapier** Short Range Air Defence Missile System (SHORADS)

**Rat Pack, rats** Rations

**RFA** Royal Fleet Auxiliary

**RIB** Rigid Inflatable Boat

**Rigid Raider** Flat-bottomed fibreglass assault dory, very fast, bumpy and you get very wet

**RO1** RN rank, Radio Operator Class 1

**Roland** French-made anti-aircraft missile system used by the Argentinians

**RS** RN rank, Radio Supervisor

**RTU'd** Returned to Unit (from a course)

**RV** Rendezvous

**SACC** Supporting Arms Co-ordinating Centre

**Salvo** Round of Naval Gunfire Support

**SAS** Special Air Service

**SBS** Special Boat Squadron Royal Marines (as in 1982, but later expanded into the Special Boat Service); also SB, SB Squadron and The Squadron

**Schoolie** Royal Navy Education Officer

**Scout** Light helicopter

**SDS** Sea King Delivery Service, also HDS (Helicopter Delivery Service) when RM or Army Gazelle helicopters were doing it

**Section** The smallest group of infantry, of 6 to 10 men

**SHAR** Sea Harrier

**SIGINT** Signals Intelligence

**SLR** British 7.62-mm Self-Loading Rifle

**Small arms** Hand weapons, rifles, SMGs, pistols and GPMGs

**SMG** Sub-Machine-Gun

**Snake** See Commando Snake

**Spoof** Joke

**Stickies** Cakes eaten at tea-time in large quantities, by soldiers embarked on ships

**Stick Orbat** List of names of people to travel in each helicopter, or to parachute, jumping together (see Orbat)

**Stroppy** Adjective meaning un-cooperative and argumentative (can lead to *bites* and even *goffa's*)

**STUFT** Ships taken up from trade: merchant ships on charter

**Tabbing** Parachute equivalent of 'yomping', i.e. head down, gun in hand, bergen as high as possible and you cover the ground steadily without pause

**Tail-end Charlie** Could be a rear gunner in an aircraft; for commando purposes, the last man in a Commando Snake, or patrol

**Tank-deck** Lower deck on any LPD

**Thunderbox** Portable lavatory

**TI** Thermal Imager

**UHF** Ultra-high Frequency

**VC10** Passenger-carrying RAF jet aircraft

**VHF** Very-High Frequency, used in military radios for medium range communications

**VT** Variable Time naval shell fuses (similar to artillery proximity fuses); operated by a sensor that explodes the shell a set height from the ground

**Watches** Royal Navy term for working shift

**Webbing** (equipment) worn around the waist, with shoulder straps and pouches (pronounced 'pooches' by Royal Marines), for ammunition, food and medical kit (also belt order and fighting order)

**Wessex** Oldest but tried and trusted RN troop-carrying helicopter

**Wet** Drink (a wet of tea; as in "I've just made us a wet")

# Acknowledgements

I owe a great deal to many people who helped me in the writing of this book, and I am glad to have the opportunity of expressing my thanks to them.

My father the late Rev Prof John McManners FBA reflected over the initial version with the jaundiced eye of a professional historian and the perceptions of a World War II soldier, and gave me counsel and the faith to persevere. My mother drew the original maps and compiled the index. I owe a lot to her painstaking toil. Lord David Ramsbotham's participation in both the publication of this book and subsequent activities was invaluable. The late Dr Richard Fargher, a World War II gunner and Oxford don, and Mary his wife, proof read the first version. My close friend and comrade-in-arms Dennis Marshall-Hasdell, a commando who uniquely is also a Buccaneer navigator, gave detailed and invaluable copy-editing advice, as well as the support I have described in my narrative. The late General Sir Thomas Morony, KCB, OBE, the Master Gunner St James's Park, read my first draft, giving vital encouragement and advice. Many others helped with the various versions of this book, including Roger Opie, Patrick Mason, Lt-Colonel Keith Eve, Lieutenant General Chris Brown, Colonel David Heaver, Mickey Warrender, Dr Mark Ironmonger and Mike Sims. I have profited from a great deal of advice, I am deeply grateful for it, but I have not always followed it, so any errors are my responsibility.

A final word of gratitude should go to my colleagues in 148 Commando Forward Observation Battery, with whom I spent five very happy years culminating in Operation Corporate. After operational tours in Gulf War One (1991) including Special Forces' Scud-hunting missions inside Iraq, a decade of Op Herrick tours in Afghanistan from 2002, the 2003 Iraq invasion, and subsequent ops in Iraq as part of Op Telic, 148 FO Battery is now getting back to their normal war role – advance force operations, as we did in the Falklands, working closely with the Royal Navy and Special Boat Service.

# Maps and Illustrations

Falkland Islands map
Fanning Head Map
Fox Bay Raid Map
Fox Bay Raid Fire Plan
Port Howard Raid Map
Operation Brewers Arms Map
Stanley Harbour Map
Beagle Ridge Observation Point Map
Beagle Ridge – First target list transmitted on 10 June
Notes from 13 June before SAS diversionary raid

# Author's Biography

Hugh McManners was born in Oxford, the eldest son of the historian, the late Prof John McManners FBA, brought up in Australia: in Tasmania and New South Wales, and educated at several schools including Sydney Church of England Grammar School (Shore), Magdalen College School, Oxford, and Oadby Beauchamp Upper School.

He joined the Army in 1972, commissioned from Sandhurst into 29 Commando Regiment, Royal Artillery. As well as full-on conventional and Special Forces warfare in the Falkland Islands, his military service has included peacekeeping tours: in Northern Ireland, and with the United Nations in Cyprus immediately after the 1974 Turkish invasion.

In 1975 the Army sponsored him to read Geography at St Edmund Hall, Oxford University, where he gained a Boxing Blue, Half Blues for Modern Pentathlon and a degree.

He joined 148 Commando Forward Observation Battery in 1978. He was awarded a 'Mention in Despatches' for his part in the Falklands War, and was a jungle warfare instructor, and Army diving supervisor. He then took up that most modest appointment of Assistant Military Assistant to the Vice Chief of the General Staff in MoD Main Building, Whitehall. Then, in the abrupt change that faces all career officers, Hugh attended The Army Staff College Camberley, then endured another staff job in the MoD. His military career flourished once more (briefly) as the battery commander of 17 (Corunna) Field Battery on an operational tour in Northern Ireland's Armagh, declining rapidly as the battery was posted to Thorny Island in Hampshire, then to Gutesloh in Germany.

Hugh left the Army in 1989. He was The Sunday Times defence correspondent for five years, and has written many books on outdoor activities, travel and military matters including *Forgotten Voices Gulf War,* and *Forgotten Voices of the Falklands* published by Ebury, *Top Guns* published by Network Books, *The Scars of War* and *Crowning the Dragon,* both published by HarperCollins. He has also co-produced television documentary series and presented television and radio programmes.

Hugh now lives in Oxford, where he has founded an Oxford University medical research foundation 'Scars of War' at The Queen's College, dedicated to the cognitive neuroscience of wars and disasters. He has two sons, the eldest a Light Dragoons' officer. (Further biographical and other details may be found at www.hughmcmanners.com) He is a very keen musician: guitarist,

songwriter and producer of live events (and more recently of recordings), mainly in the rock idiom. He is also rapidly becoming an author of fiction.

# Other Kindle books by Hugh McManners

Most of Hugh's books are currently being converted to e-book format, and will be published on Amazon throughout 2014.

Currently available: *The Scars of War*.

# *The Scars of War*

Do you want to know what war is really like?

In a work of remarkable and revealing candour, Hugh McManners – a Special Forces combat veteran himself and author of Falklands Commando – explores the brutal realities of warfare that are often glossed over in official history books, autobiographies and regimental diaries.

War is by far the most traumatic 'life event' any human being can experience – a devastating combination of danger, uncertainty and horror. What really happens on the modern battlefield? How do today's professional soldiers prepare for, and cope with, the physical and psychological hardships of combat? How do individuals behave under extreme conditions? And what happens when the combatants return to normal life?

Hugh compares the ways in which the British Army, the US Army and the Israeli Defence Force motivate their peacetime soldiery and train their special forces to 'do business'; he shows how the power and range of today's weapons – and the ability of technology to eliminate darkness so that fighting can take place around the clock – makes modern war more stressful than ever before; and he looks at the long-term psychological and emotional effects of combat, including the guilt of survivors. Case histories of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from the Vietnam, Falklands and Gulf Wars are sympathetically explored, as are army, navy and air force attitudes to the problem.

*The Scars of War* carries on where John Keegan's classic The Face of Battle left off. It is a powerful and wide-ranging report from the front, which had a profound effect on many aspects of military thinking.

Since its first publication in 1992, The Scars of War has been included on the required reading lists for many Military and War Studies courses – including The Army Staff College Camberley.

## *FROM THE REVIEWERS*

> "A noble and courageous approach to an aspect of war concealed too often and too easily… Hugh McManners has made a valuable and important breach into the citadel of a subject which has been guarded in silence for too long."
>
> *– Robert Fox, Daily Telegraph*

"A stirring and disturbing book."

– *The Times*

"The most compelling, moving and disturbing book that I've read in a very long time. Read it; I think you'll never forget it."

– *Len Deighton*

Read extract from *The Scars of War*
Buy Kindle version of *The Scars of War*

# Connect with Hugh online

For more information about Hugh's books and his personal blog, please visit Hugh's website: www.hughmcmanners.com

To discuss and chat about *Falklands Commando*, please visit its Facebook page.

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# Extract from *The Scars of War* by Hugh McManners

If you have enjoyed Hugh McManners' autobiographical book Falklands Commando, you may also be interested in his next military book – 'The Scars of War'.

As you've probably realised from the ending of 'Falklands Commando', Hugh was affected by the Falkland's war. This led to his leaving the Army in 1989. And so with a personal interest in the effect of war on professional soldiers, Hugh carried out extensive research into the psychology of modern military life: from recruiting and training, through to what happens when peacetime forces deploy to a full-scale general war. (General war is defined as when both sides have artillery and fighter ground attack.)

As a professional soldier and officer himself, Hugh has dug deep into the details of modern warfare, military discipline, how things are actually done, and what lies behind all the regimental histories and biographies. But this is no military history, but as with 'Falklands Commando', is the authentic voice of what modern warfare is really like for the professional soldiers who do the fighting.

He interviewed many of his fellows – especially veterans of the Falklands war, which is the last general war fought by the United Kingdoms' armed forces. Gulf War One was also a general war, but the speed with which the Allies destroyed Iraq's air and ground forces was unique; and so it's fighting is atypical. Hugh also looks hard at the other wars of the late 20th century; and the methods of other countries' soldiers – Israel, the USA, Russia and China.

# *The Scars of War:* PREFACE

This is the 2014 e-book edition of a book that was first published in 1992.

Since then, British troops have seen peace-keeping and peace enforcement operations in the former Yugoslavian Republic, a brief war during the invasion of Iraq, and then multi-tour counter-terrorist campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has been the British and US Army's sole focus for over a decade. It does not involve the General War operations for which armies normally train, but limited war counter terrorist operations. Combat there never involves incoming artillery or bombing strikes, and although fire fights can be intense, the norm is boring, uncomfortable, tense patrolling carrying light equipment. The main danger is from improvised bombs – IEDs, and then ambush. There are similarities with the Northern Ireland campaign.

I'm re-publishing this book as the British Army changes from its previous Afghanistan focus, back once more to preparing for General War. Most of the soldiers in today's army have spent their entire careers carrying out operations that are very much less in intensity than general war. Some of today's soldiers, particularly in the infantry, have extensive combat experience. But the nature of counter-terrorist operations has given them what senior officers are calling an 'FOB mentality'. This stems from assuming that they will always be working out of a secure forward operating base, where they return to recharge radio batteries, get more ammunition, food and water, and sleep. As in the Vietnam War, whenever possible, air strikes are used, with no fear of air strikes or artillery in return. Battles are rarely at greater than platoon strength.

Whereas General War – as in the Second World War, Korea, the Arab-Israeli wars and the Falklands – is not like this. *The Scars of War* explores the realities of General War in terms of the psychology of modern professional soldiers.

The original editions of *The Scars of War* became required reading for students at the Army Staff College, Camberley. I therefore very much hope this e-book version will help my fellow soldiers in their relearning of hard-won lessons, as they get themselves back onto a General War footing. They have gained excellent light infantry combat experience from Afghanistan which will help them; as Northern Ireland experience helped us when we were sent down south in 1982 to re-invade the Falklands.

And I most fervently hope it will help them also to avoid slipping into the disgraceful pretence that was the British Army of the Rhine in

the 1980s and 90s (and almost certainly earlier), in its pointless but enormously expensive deterrence of a Soviet invasion of Europe. Real armies deter by preparing to fight. Over the forty years since the end of the Second World War, the British Army seemed to forget this essential truth, and was only able to muster two operational brigades out of its entire strength, which needed four months preparation before being able to help oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1992.

The individuals who appear throughout this book are telling stories that many others in the Falklands and other wars could equally have told. After their experience of combat, some left the armed forces, while others continued in their military careers and were still serving when I interviewed them. I have not attempted, in editing their accounts, to select only the highlights of what they had to say, but have included most of the memories and impressions that they felt were significant.

This is important, because through having in some respects been deliberately non-selective about the men I interviewed and the material I then included in this book, I have been able to create what I hope is an accurate impression of what the modern battlefield is really like. Mostly it is boring, uncomfortable and very worrying.

There is, however, one common denominator shared by all my interviewees: they are thinking men, deeply affected by what they went through, with the intelligence, perception and humility to dig back into their broom cupboard of painful memories. For those from the Falklands War, their interviews took place around nine years afterwards. All my interviewees had deliberately suppressed all but a few happier memories of the war, and so it took considerable courage for them to speak honestly about what really happened.

These interviews were difficult, particularly at the start of each one. As a combat veteran myself, however, I was able to ask the right questions, and avoid the stupid ones – and an abrupt closing of shutters. I was also able to identify and challenge when, on a very few occasions, I was spun a yarn, or when something unpleasant was glossed over.

Each interview was a journey to a foreign land and another time, a harsh, hostile place with strange, absolute rules, where people behaved very differently. Some of the memories bubbled up like marsh gas, with a smell that made you realise this was a swamp. At the end, however, there was a feeling of relief, and remarks like ‘You are the first person I’ve ever said any of this to’; ‘Not even my wife knows what I’ve just told you’; and ‘I feel a lot better, like having got something off my chest at last’.

Catharsis was also one of my motives in writing this book. I am deeply grateful to each of my interviewees for having been so frank.

I was completing this book in the shadow of the Gulf War, after Iraq had invaded Kuwait. In the long preamble and build-up to the Allied land attack, Iraq's President Saddam Hussein threatened to use chemical and biological weapons, predicting it would be the 'mother of all battles'. During this period of fear and intense preparation, I wanted to get on record the reality of modern warfare and its effect on combatants – the reality that most civilians never consider.

Apart from the very small number of military personnel who have personally experienced combat, nobody has the faintest idea of what it is actually like – and why should they? This almost total ignorance gives rise to many unfortunate attitudes during and after wars, epitomised by newspaper headlines like 'Gotcha!' (after the Falklands War sinking of the Argentine battle cruiser *General Belgrano*) or 'Up Yours Galtieri'; or, at the other extreme, by the Synod of the Church of England agonising over the morality of the Gulf War at the same time as British soldiers were sweating it out in their anti-chemical suits. The attitudes and debates at home are often so far removed from the reality of the battlefield as to make soldiers feel isolated and even bitter.

Media coverage of the Gulf War made most of us back at home angry at its incredible waste – of life, technology and money. And as the exact same has occurred in subsequent wars – to date, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, operations in East Timor and the invasion of Iraq – we may expect to be angered by the same sense of waste in all future wars, not to mention the hours, stretching into days and weeks, of being glued to radio and television sets.

The money spent on military operations in Afghanistan was so mind-bendingly enormous that it could have re-started the exploration of space. Imagine if by now, we humans had a space station capable of launching manned flights to Mars or for setting up a Moon base, with all the accompanying technological advancements? Also, money could have been spent developing Afghanistan's infrastructure to the point where its warlords became business men? A fraction of the astronomical sums of military spending could have made them all very rich…

Gulf War One was a similarly frustrating and wasteful episode. By its unseemly, anticlimactic, botched ending, people were fed up with it, and many even in the 1992 were cynical about its aims and result. Although the USA, enjoying victory after decades of military disappointment, welcomed her soldiers home with a defiant, ticker-tape celebration, in Britain, troops and electorate alike were uneasy about the triumph, unwilling to revel in its dubious glory. The same uneasy cynicism has accompanied the highly dubious reasons for the Iraq invasion. Once our troops are all safely withdrawn from

Afghanistan, we can expect a similar questioning of motives, methodologies and outcome.

For those of us born into the second half of the twentieth century and later, it is impossible to imagine conscription and General War affecting entire nations. The USA was deeply traumatised by Vietnam conscription, but this affected just one generation, and was limited to the less affluent socio-economic groups who were conscripted. Germany is still deeply troubled, but largely silent about its Second World War experience. Japan is similarly reticent; whereas following on from the Soviet Union's determination never to forget having been invaded by Germany, Russia reveres its wartime heroes, and continues to honour their actions.

But even in Russia, the later generations cannot truly understand what war is really like; and the fading or dead generations that do understand, are loath to talk about it. This is entirely understandable – and proper. Life should not be about fighting, violence and death, but about living.

It is however important to get war into the right perspective.

War is far from being an entirely miserable experience; rather it is a peculiar mixture of pain, horror, and heady excitement, creating an emotional cocktail that some combatants actually relish. Mercenaries have been a constant factor in military history; and are so today, in Africa, the former Soviet republics, and as they were in the confusion of the Yugoslav civil war. A more recent trend seems to be for western Muslims to seek *jehad* in places like Syria and the Horn of Africa. Their misguided, corrupted religious motivation seems to me to have a naive sort of thrill-seeking at its root – for both now, and in their promised after-life. This non-nationalistic 'fighting for a cause' is a notable phenomenon, carrying similarities to for example the Brits and others who went to Spain to fight fascism in the Spanish Civil war.

So, modern mercenaries, by which I mean soldiers with no strong allegiances for which they fight, risk life and limb as much because they enjoy it, as for the money. We can assume that their historical forebears were similarly engaged.

The actual fighting can provide a diversion from the misery of a campaign, which actually buoys people up and keeps them going. I 'enjoyed' the Falklands War: being part of a brotherhood of dedicated, like-minded people I knew extremely well; amid the excitement of doing the job I'd trained to do, in a unique atmosphere of almost cavalier but ruthlessly serious professionalism.

Indeed, many combatants look back on 'their war' as the most rewarding times of their lives, when human relations were at their most meaningful, and life had a clear purpose. For those without

personal experience of war, it must seem very strange that something so essentially terrible could be remembered in such a way. It is perhaps an indication of the extent to which war affects combatants that they should return to normal society with such feelings.

After a war, however, combatants do not just turn smartly to the right and march off into the sunset, restarting their normal lives from where they were interrupted. There is a price to be paid for the basic freedoms that we enjoy and that which governments do in our name (whether or not we agree with them). Because our professional armed forces do the dirty work on our behalf, most voters and citizens remain blissfully unaware of that price, while our Service men and women pay it. This book seeks to explain the complicated nature of that price, and the emotional overdraft that combat veterans run up in war, which afterwards many never manage to pay off.

War is by far the most traumatic 'life event' that any human can experience, a damaging combination of danger, uncertainty and horror. Civilian experiences, no matter how terrible, are simply not in the same league.

Steven Hughes, today an orthopaedic surgeon, back in 1982 was an army captain and 2nd Battalion the Parachute Regiment's doctor throughout the battles for Goose Green and Wireless Ridge during the Falklands War:

> "I can't think of a civilian experience of similar magnitude – not even the Clapham train disaster, King's Cross fire or whatever. It's like willingly taking part in the disaster – all of you going to King's Cross, including setting fire to the place yourselves… It also lasted for a sustained period of time."

Psychologists have identified a scale of normal human occurrences: such as divorce, bereavement, changing job, moving house and so on, which seriously affect all of us at various times in our lives. These 'life events' can occur simultaneously; for example divorce, moving house and changing job often go together. It is accepted that the upward spiral of stress created by experiencing two or more 'life events' at the same time, can have marked and injurious effects on the health of the unfortunate individuals going through the emotional mill.

On the battlefield, in addition to the ordinary stress of being separated from their families and doing a 'new job' somewhere strange, professional soldiers suffer frequent bereavements and an increasing sense of danger and personal vulnerability. This is in addition to the horrors they see and the terrible things they find themselves doing. They are bolstered to an extent by their training

and by unit *esprit de corps*, but being human they suffer nevertheless. Many experience serious psychological problems on the battlefield; and many more develop long-term problems when they return to peacetime life.

This book takes a hard look at the realities of modern warfare, not from a historical or military point of view, but from an emotional perspective, through the eyes of the individuals who do the fighting. Although it concentrates on the Falklands War (because I fought in it and it's the most recent general war fought by British soldiers), it draws also from other modern wars in order to establish the common truths of what really happens when men use modern weapons against each other.

I realise that for veterans of the two World Wars, the shortness of modern general wars is something that differentiates their experiences from those of today's combatants. However, it needs also to be understood that the Second World War was a series of campaigns all over the world. For individuals, over the six years 1939-45, this might have meant fighting in one battle of one campaign, no battles – or conversely, continuous service for example in the North Atlantic convoys.

Within a single battle, some were in the thick of it throughout, whereas others were for a time – or remained on the periphery. A "Desert Rat" could have fought in every North Africa battle, then up through Italy. Others might have done nothing but training until D Day. Fighting in the First World War was less diverse; but nevertheless was broken up into periods of a week or so in the front line trenches, interspersed with a couple of weeks back in the relative normality of the rear areas, with cafes, bars and women. The frontline was usually a place of steady attrition; patrolling at night, being shelled and sniped at sporadically by day. The "over the top" nightmares of mass casualties and heavy bombardments occurred only during major offensives. Of course, the individual had little knowledge of when offensives were likely, and so could live in perpetual fear, especially as the norm was regular exposure to friends being killed and wounded. For me, its psychological domination of life is illustrated by the fact that soldiers on leave in London, in the early hours of the morning, could hear artillery bombardments taking place on the Western Front.

For various reasons, modern general wars fought with modern weapon systems are likely to be short and furious. This requires peacetime troops to be constantly ready for imminent combat, which means also being prepared for very significant psychological shocks when finally they do fight in actual battle. There can be no sensible comparison of relative difficulty, unpleasantness or potential psychological effect between the World Wars and the wars of today.

It is equally impossible to rank the unpleasantness of those earlier wars with those of today. Dramatic improvements in hygiene, rations, medical services and personal equipment make the lot of the modern soldier seem easier, but have been more than equalled by increases in weapon lethality – and in the amount of equipment modern soldiers carry. Today's average battlefield loads are heavier than those of the World Wars; one reason is the ubiquitous need for batteries to power everything; and body armour.

However this book is not about the battles of history, but about what faces Service men and women today, on modern battlefields. The horrors of medieval warfare or the bloodbaths of the First World War are relevant to this book only in so far as they help us to understand what happens today. Much of the basic brutality remains unchanged. I would never presume to lessen the memory, bravery or achievements of those who fought in those battles in any way.

Writing as a former professional soldier, I begin by looking at life in a peacetime army, describing the lifestyle, aspirations and motivations that men and women take with them to war. We then follow the 'blooding' process, in which a soldier's career steps up several gears moving from peacetime professionals to becoming combat-hardened troops.

The threats and strictures of military law in modern volunteer armies play different roles in peacetime and in war. These roles, which very much affect men's behaviour in battle, can only be understood if military law is examined in its historical context. Within modern professional armies, although the full punitive force of military law still lurks in the shadows, it is no longer the prime motivator that forces men to fight. On today's technical and increasingly individual battlefield, there is little of the close, shoulder-to-shoulder comradeship of 18th-century infantry square formations. Modern soldiers fight more lonely, individual battles – a tendency that will increase as technology develops. Self-motivation created through training is therefore far more important than ever before, and more effective than imposed discipline. Military law nevertheless underpins this self-motivation, and today has a more subtle and complex role to play than in the past – thus earning a chapter of its own.

Unlike virtually any other profession, members of the armed forces prepare for something they hope never to have to do. Without the experience of real operations, practising and training can easily become the perceived purpose of peacetime armed forces which, when they are required to fight, must then slough off a great many misapprehensions and bad practices. Conversely, for well-trained troops, real operations pull together everything they've learned, revealing the purpose of drills and functions that previously had been

accepted but not fully understood.

The selection and training of Special Forces creates an expectation and commitment in each man, of the likelihood of having to fight (Chapter 4: Commitment to Fight). This advanced sort of military training, which would be unsuitable for "line" units (by which I mean those other than Special Forces), makes the process of going into battle for the first time (Chapter 5: 'First Blood'), much easier.

Special Forces refer to combat as 'doing business' – it's their job, and how they earn their pay. 'Doing business' varies greatly across the different armed Services: in psychological attitude, physical conditions, personal stress and actual danger. The common denominator is death, hence the uncertainty with which each person fights his war. 'Combat at Sea', on 'Land' and in the 'Air' have therefore their own chapters.

'Commanders' also have a chapter: from those at the very top the chain of command down to the platoon commanders with their sergeants and section commanders at the bottom who actually do the fighting. Confusion in war is total, command exercised by determined men feeling their way often blindly as if through smoke. The only certain products of their actions are death and terrible injury. Commanders must accept and understand this; in order to save lives, and to remain able to continue fighting. 'Coping with Carnage' therefore has a chapter of its own.

And when the war is over, the 'Aftermath' is often as difficult to handle as the fighting, the time when men become aware of what they have done, and when enormous efforts must be made to re-establish the rules of law and civilisation. In the moment of survival, men wonder why they are living, and why their friends died (Chapter 12: 'The Quick and the Dead'), wondering who protected them, or at the nature of a god that allowed such carnage to occur. The aftermath is also the time when those products of war – the dead – must be disposed of, some anonymously into unmarked pits, others with all the care and emotion of their grieving friends.

The final chapter takes us beyond victory parades and retrospective television documentaries ('Was it all worthwhile?'), to see what happens when combatants return to normal life. Unfortunately, they do not in the military phrase 'go home to tea and medals', but must find ways of putting the horrors of the war behind them. The long-term emotional effect of combat becomes 'Another Kind of War'(Chapter 13). Perhaps the reason for old soldiers 'never dying but merely fading away', is that to varying extents, by the end, when they realise how many of their friends have been killed, they're already dead emotionally.

When studies are made of battles, or when regimental histories are compiled, individuals are often forgotten. The lives of great commanders are researched avidly, but because so many individuals were involved in achieving the victories that these great men planned, it is impossible to see it through their many and different eyes. For each combatant, war is a very parochial, localised experience, almost impossible to relate to a battle or campaign as a whole. Nevertheless, it is the individual who wins wars. Chinagraph arrows drawn by generals on large-scale maps have never yet hurt anybody. The actual killing must be done by a vast variety of people, each with different hopes, fears and aspirations.

The individual is the most important and, for me, the most interesting part of the military machine – purely because, despite enormous pressures to conform to become a mere component, in battle most military people remain human and act according to their individual strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, their individuality is often the vital spark that creates victory from the potential defeat that every battle starts out as being for both sides.

Individual memories of combat are often at odds with history books, autobiographies and official regimental diaries. For many reasons, whether humane or for all manner of expediency, the unpalatable is often altered or omitted from published accounts. For those without experience of it, combat can appear (in comparison to what actually happened) sanitised and gentlemanly, or excitingly heroic in the 'John Wayne' tradition. Individuals also edit their own memories, because remembering the truth is often too painful for them to bear.

Breaking through what to outsiders can seem a conspiracy of silence, is only really possible for someone who has been in combat too – who can understand and ask the right questions. I achieved breakthroughs in many of my interviews, and was quite surprised at some of the things I learned.

For combat veterans the war does not end as the peace treaty is signed. For many the scars do not emerge for months, years or even decades after the last shot was fired. The war lives on in their imaginations, a vivid, terrifying nightmare of guilt, bereavement and black impending doom souring their lives thereafter. Although these long-term effects are only now being identified and accepted by the medical profession, thousands of veterans from past wars have suffered them (and still suffer) in silence – often without realising the cause of their pain.

The power and range of modern weapons, and the ability of technology to eliminate darkness so that fighting can take place around the clock, makes modern war very much more stressful than it

has been hitherto. The numbers of men suffering long-term psychological injury are thus likely to increase dramatically. Indeed, some experts feel that war and modern weapons are now so destructive that their human operators will no longer be able to cope with the strain of the modern battlefield environment – as seen in the complete disintegration of the Iraqi Army under the Allies' air and artillery bombardment in February 1991. It is often suggested that to fight future wars, men will have to train specifically to withstand psychological as well as physical hardship, and might even need to resort to the official use of stress and fatigue-reducing drugs more sophisticated than the Benzedrine 'uppers' and traditional alcohol of past wars.

Unfortunately, some peacetime military men prefer not to think realistically enough about this dimension of combat. They see 'cracking up' as a sign of personal weakness – particularly if it comes as the result of combat. The military 'stiff upper lip' must not quiver, either during the fighting or afterwards. This intolerance of perceived weakness is a tribal belief which, individually and privately, many military men deplore.

It is in fact the intolerance and not the 'cracking-up' that is the real problem – an intolerance born of ignorance and perhaps even fear. Without an honest acceptance of the harsh realities of the modern battlefield by the military in general (and their leaders in particular), their troops may indeed crack under the strain and, like the poor Iraqi Army, be unable to fire a shot.

This military problem aside, from the perspective of the individual, the long-term effects of the stress of battle are more important than the problems facing military authorities in fighting wars. There is nothing new about these long-term effects. After the Second World War an entire generation was personally affected by their experiences. Afterwards, they put the war behind them and concentrated on winning the peace – no mean task. They were all in it together, which may partly explain their reluctance to admit having been adversely affected as individuals. This is changing, albeit too slowly to be of much benefit to the survivors of that generation.

Unlike the Second World War generation, today's professional service men and women are a minority in the population of their countries. In the years and decades following wars, one might therefore think that their long-term, post-combat psychological problems should therefore be more easily identifiable. This however has proved not to be the case. The minority status of combat veterans has made isolation an even greater problem. In the future, combat veterans are likely to feel even more isolated from the rest of their generation. This makes them unwilling and unable to talk with

civilians about either their war experiences or the psychological after-effects.

Isolation is a killer. For humans, both on the battlefield and then afterwards in civilian life, isolation can be an enemy more damaging than weapons.

This book is about modern war, fought by professional, career soldiers. It's a new and very different sort of war from that fought by the conscripted amateurs in the past. Expertise apart, technology and politics have also changed the way battles are fought: short and very sharp rather than drawn-out campaigns.

In the British Army, the 2nd Battalion of the Parachute Regiment is the only unit since the Korean War to have fought two consecutive, full-scale modern battles in the same campaign – the Falklands War. Their experience is unique, and so in extracts from my interviews with Falklands War veterans I have drawn upon their experiences (and those of their sister Falklands battalion 3 Para) as much as possible.

In November 1990, I was invited back to the British Army Staff College at Camberley in Surrey, for a two-day study period on 'The Realities of War', covering topics like the effect of firepower on morale, becoming a prisoner of war and the stress of higher command. When I'd been a student there in 1984, the same lectures, given by many of the same people, had been called 'The Stress Study'. I wondered if the change of name had any significance.

My role second time round was as a veteran of the Falklands. Apart from enjoying splendid lunches and a regimental dinner, I listened to the lectures for a second time in the company of a distinguished cadre of Second World War veterans, and then joined one of the student 'syndicates' for group discussion. The Staff College students were supposed to gain insight from our experience.

In the second lecture, about the Falklands, one of the speakers explained the reason for the study period name change. 'The Stress Study' had seemed to concentrate on the psychological problems of combat, and not on the positive things that military leaders must do to motivate soldiers to fight. Psychiatrists had become involved, and were thought by the military men to be turning combat stress into an acceptable reason for failure of nerve on the battlefield.

In changing the name to 'The Realities of War', the military were bringing the subject back into familiar territory, back under their control, reasserting time-honoured and hard-learned values of discipline and leadership. This was an important move, as 'medicalising' problems greatly reduces the chances of patients re-establishing themselves as soldiers.

Military people of all ranks know that common sense is better than psychological self-indulgence. But giving military psychiatrists

the responsibility for dealing with 'battle stress' was to give them an actual war-fighting, combat-enhancing role that they relished. They had previously been relegated to dealing with 'ordinary' mental illness or advanced alcoholic difficulties, or on the periphery of criminal matters like sexual offences and family violence. But now the psychiatrists had at last found a role for themselves on the modern battlefield. They weren't about to give it up.

Unfortunately, the post Second World War determination of US Army psychiatrists to avoid the huge numbers of battle shock casualties experienced in that war, led to the Vietnam War's 'DERO' system (date of expected return from overseas). This was a major part of the creation of the huge numbers of PTSD victims that characterise the US experience of Vietnam for us today.

This unfortunate involvement of military psychiatrists continues today, and can be summed up quite simply. No self-respecting military man or woman wants to be seen by a 'shrink'; and many of the so-called 'stress-related' post-combat problems are normal reactions to abnormal events – and not mental illness. Medical science hasn't yet worked out precisely what's going on neurologically, but even now we know that psychiatrists are not the solution. As I describe later in this book, the Army had already worked this out by the end of the First World War.

From the military point of view, it all boils down to a question of discipline. When faced with problems – or danger – individuals have the choice of reacting positively, or of being overwhelmed and crumbling under the strain. Discipline can help the individual by programming him into positive reaction – resolving the dilemma by removing the element of choice. What might be termed 'rejection of choosing' is what military people call being 'well disciplined'.

It is well known that stress can be either a healthy stimulant or, if not handled correctly, a killer. The simple changing of the name of the Camberley Staff College study period was a positive military reaction to the whole question of battle stress, facing up to the harsh realities of war, rather than worrying pointlessly (and impotently) about the effects of the stress that these realities cause.

The attitudes of servicemen to battle stress, and the psychological effects of battle on combatants are understandably very sensitive matters. Everybody knows that war is bloody awful, but if you are a professional soldier, sailor or airman, there's no point in dwelling on it. All military forces practise some kind of 'machismo' or 'stiff upper lip', which keeps them going in adversity, but can make them seem blind and insensitive. From the point of view of professional institutions like the Staff College, both Directing Staff and students know that wars have to be planned and fought. It's their job. Ignoring

unpleasant facts would be stupid, but equally, becoming obsessed with the dreadful horror of future battlefields is not the function of military men.

Military attitudes to this highly sensitive subject have evolved… Before the Falklands War, the Royal Navy in particular was oriented towards a peacetime existence: official trips to exotic ports, bands, flags, cocktail parties and bunting. In the Falklands, some naval personnel, finding themselves involved in a full-blown modern sea war, were taken by surprise. Service psychiatrists, particularly those from the Royal Navy, attempted to draw attention to the various post-Falklands problems of many veterans. Vietnam veterans had suffered similar problems, labelled as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). But in the early 1980s, few members of such a rational group of people as the Armed Forces had much time for psychiatrists, especially 'shrinks in uniform' pointing accusing fingers at the way fighting men plan and fight their wars.

In the often narrow-minded politics of Service life, minority points of view (and opposition to them) are often overstated in order to be heard, or are used as platforms to further the reputations of individuals. Views become polarised, then common sense evaporates. This process may unfortunately have confused the very important debate within the Armed Forces over combat stress and its long-term effects.

In their publicising of PTSD, military psychiatrists have a very important contribution to make towards the training of men for war, and their psychological care afterwards. However, I realised during this 1990 Staff College study period that the psychiatrists had (temporarily) lost their influence. PTSD had become a rather tedious subject, regarded with varying degrees of scorn or indifference – even as an indication of weakness of character. One lecturer even referred to PTSD as 'Compensationitis'.

Most of the other combat veterans present at the study period had served in the Second World War. In syndicate discussions, several made very disparaging comments about combat stress, recounted ordering gibbering men to 'pull themselves together', even drawing their pistols as further encouragement. Their clear-cut response to battle stress problems was greeted with relieved laughter, the veterans seeming to have contradicted the psychiatrists' depressing predictions. But actually these Second World War veterans did not want to discuss battle stress, and seemed happier telling war stories than answering the students' questions. I came away with the strong feeling that we had been given sanitised versions of a very different reality.

Perhaps because the Second World War affected everyone in that generation, they rarely talked openly about it. There are a few Second

World War autobiographies in which the unvarnished reality comes through, but many more are in the Boy's Own Paper style, in which everybody seems to behave stereotypically. Forty years of telling abridged versions of war stories to children could have had something to do with it. We were always asking my father (a Second World War infantry officer) to 'tell us a story from the war'. Only once did he let slip something unpleasant.

The Second World War also affected civilians. In the first three months of the Blitz, 12,696 Londoners were killed. When the worst of the bombing was over, in November alone, 4,558 were killed (in all of Britain) and thousands more injured. Civilians saw grotesque horrors equal to those of the Falklands or the Gulf, yet they appear to have learned to cope. After the war, 'winning the peace' was more important than dwelling on the past, and frank talk about the war was confined to old comrades reunions, many of which (participants' health permitting) still flourish today. At the end of his excellent book *18 Platoon* (published in 1987) Sydney Jary declares that he did not suffer 'nervously or emotionally' as a result of his battle experiences. He won an MC as a platoon commander in the Somerset Light Infantry, fighting from the Normandy landings in June 1944 until the end of the war in Bremen. However it is clear from the final pages of Jary's book, that normal life was pallid and unsatisfactory to him afterwards, and that as a sensitive man and first-class soldier, he had been very deeply affected.

It could be that the enormous stress of the Second World War, a desperate struggle for freedom against a very tangible evil, affected that entire generation. Everyone was living in the fast lane of life; falling in love, marrying and parting within days, losing their children to unknown foster parents and their homes to the Luftwaffe.

We, who did not live through those years, think of the dead of that war as mere names on memorials, as the forgotten people who never completed their journey. We never knew them. We can only know the survivors of that war, and we base most of our impressions of it upon what they chose to tell us. In so doing, maybe we are forgetting the nature of their journey, and the significance of all those who died along the way? The MP Enoch Powell talked hauntingly of this. Many people lost all their friends in the war, and in their hearts wish that they too had died with them. War and youth were synonymous, and with the peace came a realisation that the one had taken the other forever. Perhaps an entire generation was burnt out by the emotional experiences of the Second World War, never fully to regain its zest and youthfulness? Such a suggestion would not be disputed in the Soviet Union where, despite the tribulations that followed the war against Hitler, war memories are sombre, with both

respect and hatreds well-preserved.

But one must not generalise about the collective effects of individual trauma on nations: the Japanese reaction to defeat and the atomic destruction of two major cities made them the second most economically powerful nation in the world. Germany has succeeded in an equally miraculous way. In many ways, Britain paid for this…

There is however no doubt of the suffering of the war generation in Germany. Today they suffer doubly the shame of their children: for what happened, and also for joining and so tacitly supporting the moral degeneracy that allowed the worst of the Nazi excesses to take place. Some of that older generation have become stridently defensive, but most refuse to talk about it.

Humans are very tough and resourceful, solving most of their emotional and psychological problems without professional help. The most common self-therapies for PTSD are hard work to keep the memories at bay, and drugs (usually alcohol) to induce sleep at night. Today, psychiatrists have discovered that the suppressed emotions of the war generation are giving way to a very delayed PTSD, forty years on. As the young men who survived the Second World War retired, entered old age and lost their spouses, for the first time since the war they found themselves with time to spare. Many Second World War, Korea and older veterans of more recent wars are seeking medical help with PTSD problems, as their memories catch up with them.

Members of the ‘stiff upper lip brigade’ are still among us, but within the military, combat experience has greatly lessened the numbers. Combat veterans know that ‘but for the grace of God’ applies, and know personally the feeling of cowardice.

But this being peacetime, and most people in the Armed Forces having no actual ‘killing people with guns’ combat experience, the intolerance of ‘stiff upper lip’ affects policy, treatment and the lives of serving combat veterans. The MoD’s senior psychiatrist told me that even in the Royal Army Medical Corps, one half ‘got it’, and the other half did not. The psychological problems created by war are hardly an indication of weakness or defective character. On the contrary, all these stress-related symptoms are a normal, sane response to its horrors.

Wars however, are not all horror. On the battlefield many find humour, comradeship, self-sacrifice, human dignity and even love, a richness of life that can make peacetime seem selfish, mean and rather squalid. War affects people in different ways: in the extremes, some become clinically mad, while others live perfectly happy, normal lives. It is true to say, however, that everyone is to some extent affected. Only a psychopath could claim otherwise. Most war veterans are made stronger by their experiences, seeing life through new and more

grateful eyes. Some slip in and out of various forms of depression – like everybody else.

However, unlike most people, war vets are very tough and know how to endure pain.

**2014 Note:**

The publication of *The Scars of War* in 1992 was accompanied by howls of disapproval from a certain type of military officer and from the MoD. The then director of Army PR was told 'this book is going to cause us a lot of trouble'. They saw the book's often-graphic veracity as being so revealing as to constitute a threat to the Armed Forces' ability to fight future wars.

However it was clear to the war veterans who read the book, that this was the authentic voice of real professional soldiers describing a reality that civilians, politicians, MoD officials – and that certain type of military officer, do not know; and it would seem, cannot understand. As veterans and non-myopic military officers read the book, I was soon being invited to give lectures to serving military audiences, with *The Scars of War* appearing on prescribed military and university War Studies reading lists – including at The Army Staff College Camberley.

Then some seven years later, this emerging realisation of the problems led to the High Court case 'Veterans vs MoD' in which *The Scars of War* was used as the basis of a class action against the MoD. The grounds were that the MoD had not provided appropriate care for veterans with PTSD and other combat-related psychological conditions.

Sadly this class action failed, which left these problems just as painful and debilitating for veterans as they'd ever been. But actually, I realised, things were made worse. Veterans' problems had been officially denied by the Establishment, which had been supported by the Courts. The MoD had prevailed, and as I discovered, could now stick to its myopic perspective of this being a potential liability to the MoD – and an 'unnecessary' expense. Given the hundreds of millions the MoD wastes as a matter of course, their unpleasant and immoral refusal to help veterans sickened me.

At first I was so deeply disillusioned that I walked away from the whole problem. I felt I'd done my bit, had failed, and that somebody else would do a better job. But nothing was done…

So I spent seven years of trying to work out how this issue could somehow be made important enough to get better help for the many affected serving and retired war veterans. I decided that scientific research was the way ahead; to bring the authorities who could relive their suffering, onto a grid of proven and incontrovertible fact.

And so then, in 2009, I met Oxford and Aarhus Universities'

Professor Morten Kringelbach, a pioneering neuroscientist specialising in understanding the role and function of the brain's prefrontal cortex. His expertise, and intense personal interest, were in those aspects of the brain that cause the symptoms I had been studying and documenting for the previous decade.

And so in 2011, The Scars of War Foundation was formed as part of Oxford University's Psychiatric Department, based at The Queen's College where many history-changing scientific discoveries have been made: including the synthesis of penicillin, and the antibiotics that were to save millions of military lives.

In 2012, The Scars of War Foundation began a neuroimaging study comparing brain function in veterans with PTSD, to veterans with similar military experience with no symptoms.

Our current 'chronic PTSD' project, and a new 'before and after' longitudinal study (to be carried out subject to MoD permission) will show us what PTSD is, how bangs on the head and explosions might contribute to veteran's psychological problems, and how these problems begin and develop. From this, we will aim to determine ways to achieve early and accurate diagnosis of these problems, and effective treatment.

The long-term aim is to reduce the numbers of military people ending up as long-term, chronically-affected victims. Apart from dramatically cutting the cost of care to military charities, this will hugely reduce the burden of pain suffered by so many of our war veterans.

# *The Scars of War:* CHAPTER 1 – FIGHTING THE PEACE

The psychologist Norman F. Dixon quotes a scathing description of the militarist, whose characteristics he ascribes to all soldiers:

> "The militarist is a relatively prejudiced and authoritarian person. He is emotionally dependent, socially conformist and religiously orthodox. His interest in the welfare of others is relatively low. He is extremely distrustful of the new and strange.' Such people are also 'uncreative, unimaginative, narrow-minded, security-seeking, prestige-orientated, parochial, ultra-masculine, anti-intellectual, extroversive [extrovert], and severely socialised as children'. They are lacking in aesthetic appreciation, complexity of thinking, independence, self-expression and altruism, and relatively high in anxiety. Finally, military professionals are lower in self-esteem than any other occupational group."[16]

If all soldiers fitted this description, then an army would at least consist of like-minded people; but every person is different, and armies are manned by human beings and not Dixon's caricatures. Some might be as Dixon describes, but may not show it. Some might be partly 'militarist' but with other characteristics, while others are not militarist at all. In other words, Dixon's generalisation is just that, and useful only as a yardstick against which to compare real military people.

Nevertheless, there is an 'official' military attitude or outlook, but this is very different to Dixon's cartoon 'militarist'. Rather, there is a sort of common denominator that everybody in a military organisation understands – and will ultimately defer to.

When young men enquire about joining the armed forces, the recruiters do not include quotations like Dixon's in the pamphlets they hand out. Instead they emphasise aspects of military life that would be attractive to their target audience – like prestige, masculinity, 'extrovert-ism' and security, while making virtues of conformism, discipline, authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism. Recruits either accept the recruiters' picture, which is strongly confirmed throughout basic training, or they find military life intolerable and leave.

Military selection and training sets great store on the moulding of individuals into membership of the military team. Fitting-in is paramount.

Conformism is possibly the most important personal

characteristic, particularly for officers. Armies tend to get rid of misfits and only tolerate odd-ball characters if (paradoxically) they happen to fit in; because they have something to offer like sporting prowess, an amusing and acceptable eccentricity, or they can be adopted as mascots. The stress of peacetime life in the armed forces is in many ways related to this constant pressure to conform. Peace is so different to war that to survive the peace, armies have to change, often radically, in character. Excellent soldiers can become frustrated in peacetime and so 'misbehave' according to the peacetime ethos. The peacetime military hierarchy will not tolerate their antics even though it accepts the worth of such men in war.

When a peacetime army goes to war, its attitudes, prejudices and habits often have to be rapidly and radically changed if the unit is to become combat effective. Some units, like much of the Israeli Defence Force and British paratroopers and marines, are already oriented towards combat. Others, like the British Army of the Rhine in the autumn of 1990, were more oriented towards the military routines established by forty years of peace. British combat units in Germany, particularly the armour, were often as much as two-thirds below their proper fighting strength, with inadequately maintained vehicles.

In getting to combat strength to fight Gulf War One (forcing Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait), the rest of the British Army was plundered of men, spare parts and vehicles – effectively being put out of action in order to put two operational brigades into the field. Geographically and psychologically, British Gulf troops underwent a severe transformation, from a damp German autumn to the heat of the Saudi desert. Luckily there was plenty of time, and once units were acclimatised a gruelling programme of tough exercises knocked everybody into shape.

Each individual who goes to war is under tremendous pressure anyway. In the enormous emotional upheaval of leaving family and friends, each combatant brings a whole catalogue of personal problems with them onto the battlefield.

It is accepted by psychiatrists, that men with the additional burden of personal problems are more likely to become psychological battle casualties. Then, when individuals return from war, peacetime attitudes are re-imposed with depressing swiftness, seeming to wipe out everything that has been learned in combat. The individual, however, may not be able to re-adjust as quickly as the mechanisms of the military system, and so finds himself an outsider in the army for which he has just been fighting. If he is parted from those with whom he fought, he can feel seriously isolated, with the pressures of peacetime army life bearing heavily down upon him.

One of the critical personnel problems suffered by very large

armies is a loss of personal identity caused by the sheer scale of the organisation. It is vitally important, regardless of the size of an army, for each soldier to feel that his individual effort counts towards the whole. Keeping people together for as long as possible is important, too; enabling individuals to perceive the vast, monolithic organisation of the army proper as being split into small, family-type units with which they can identify. Soldiers generally prefer this kind of stability.

The Israeli Defence Force do exactly this, even keeping the same groups of recruit soldiers together in the same units during and then after training. Individual soldiers thus identify strongly with their units, and the leaders get to know their men really well. In the intimacy that develops in such close-knit groups, each man knows his role and worth. Some British regiments derive tremendous strength from the continuity of their personnel. There are still examples of whole families serving in the same regiment; father as the RSM with sons as private soldiers and NCOs in the rifle companies. Several generations of officers from the same families might be commissioned into the same regiment – and even command it.

However, some armies, notably the US Army, rotate individuals between units on short (two-year) postings. An average US Army platoon is therefore rarely the same from one week to the next, with individuals being drafted in and others moving out at the end of their postings. In the British Army, the Royal Engineers operate a similar system for both officers and soldiers (to give everyone a wide range of engineering experience), whereas in the Royal Artillery and the service corps, only the officers rotate between units.

In really large armies, individuals often feel lost within the system, as if being moved like driftwood along an enormous beach. Most military people are forced into adopting peculiar attitudes towards friendship, based on the reality that most of the people they meet will soon be posted away, never to be seen again. Although people become adept at picking up friendships again (often many years later) the relationships they make tend to be only transitory, and easily discarded.

Children who grow up in a military environment (‘army brats’) move around with their parents, and so must adopt the same attitude to their own friends. If sent to boarding school, they gain a degree of stability, but see little of their parents. However, military fathers are not often at home anyway, spending around seven to ten months each year away (in my personal experience). In eighteen years, a father could easily be absent for a total of eight years, his child attending nine different schools and the family moving twelve times.[17]

In the turbulence of peacetime military life, it is hardly surprising therefore, that individuals ignore the need to plan ahead, perhaps to

the extent of behaving irresponsibly in failing to prepare for their own futures. Being mucked about by the army is part of the job; as British soldiers say, 'If you can't take a joke, you shouldn't have joined.' Planning anything outside the army can easily come to grief – from holidays to future careers, so many don't bother.

In some armies, notably in China and the permanent cadre of the former Soviet Red Army, soldiers and their families are treated very much better than the rest of the population. The US Army, despite its highly disruptive posting system, goes to great lengths to make moving easy, and keep wives and families happy. Such American corporate measures as 'spouse satisfaction' are treated as jokes by British Army personnel staff officers – who, by contrast with the professional attitude of their US Army counterparts, can seem uncaring amateurs. Whereas The US Army pays all movement costs, British Army personnel must endure an inefficient and desperately bureaucratised movement system, and end up out of pocket every time they are posted somewhere new (this system is under review).

The environment from which individuals proceed into combat determines the level of personal stress they are suffering from to start with. The level of this pre-combat stress determines to a great extent how an individual will cope with the greatly increased stress of combat. This can be visualised like the proverbial cup full of troubles; the fuller it is at the beginning, the less can be added before it overflows.

This psychological concept translates directly into a well- known military maxim: that high morale is essential for troops going into battle. Family and personal welfare contribute towards morale, as does the standard of administration practised in each unit. The domestic, social and administrative peculiarities of peacetime armies, and the stress that peacetime military life places upon individuals and their families is critical to understanding how individuals are affected, in both the short and long term, by the savageries of war.

Military life always has preparation for war as its background, even though most individuals join for reasons other than any desire to go fight. They want to travel, to improve themselves by gaining useful qualifications, and because they 'always wanted to'.

One British Army psychiatrist told me that he'd never taken a history from a patient who said he'd joined in order to defend his country. Rather than indicating that few people join the Armed Forces 'to serve Queen and country', this surprising statement suggests to me that individuals who fail to think through the full implications of joining the Army are more likely to develop psychological problems. Furthermore, this shows how deductions by military psychiatrists, whose knowledge of Army life depends on what those who become

their patients chose to tell them, should not be applied to the rest of the Army…

On joining the army, many young people find themselves away from home and family for the first time, suffering the homesickness that boarding-school pupils have got out of their systems very early in their lives. In addition, during those first few very demanding months, the nature of their new career emerges in a carefully orchestrated series of exercises and progressions. The most interesting is the least demanding – the formal demonstrations of the military weapons they will be trained to use.

The possibility of having to use real, killing weapons against real people, and having similar weapons firing back should be accepted by every Service person early on in their career. Firepower demonstrations and other events in training bring home the reality of what military weapons are designed ultimately to do, and should have the effect of forcing individuals to think through the real implications of being in the Armed Forces. But this isn't how these demonstrations are presented, for the understandable reason of not wanting to frighten the recruits.

As is the deliberate intention at military tattoos or Army-style family open days, many recruits watch these demonstrations with glee and excitement, rather than the sober realisation of their weapons' killing power. It seemed to me, when I was going through this stage at Sandhurst, that individuals who'd been ultra-keen members of school Cadet Corps or Territorial Army units, were more likely to be in the gleeful category. Professional soldiers denigrate such ultra-keenness as being 'Army barmy', which I consider a very healthy perspective…

If we were to compare a military career with that of medicine, a significant difference would be that all doctors are certain to encounter death in their work. Medical students must face death very early in their training, to the extent of spending their first term hunched over corpses in the dissecting room. In the process of learning anatomy, they also learn to shut off the grim reality of what they are doing with macabre jokes as the beginnings of a detached, professional manner.

Soldiers in Western peacetime armies, by contrast, may never have shots fired at them in anger, or encounter death. For them, accepting the darker side of their military career is not therefore always necessary. At the start of hostilities in the Falklands, particularly when the Argentine air force began to sink British ships, a significant number of individuals found that being personally involved in a real war was shocking to them, something they'd not expected. After years of carefree military duty (one man I knew had done 22 years in the Navy), they were belatedly having to face up to all the

implications of being members of the Armed Forces under the terrifying pressure of real enemy fire.

But ironically this 'carefree' peacetime soldiering is stressful in ways that can make real combat seem a release – and almost a relief. The psychology of this is related to the army's ultimate role. If the aim of peacetime training is clearly understood by everybody to be the realistic preparation for war, individuals can think themselves into the jobs they will have to do, come to terms with the risks and practise with a strong sense of purpose. In those circumstances, life is simple, satisfying and clearly directed.

If, however, individuals think it unlikely that they will ever have to do their jobs in combat, their motivations and perception change. The army becomes a peacetime career for them, with well-defined hurdles to be overcome and promotion as the reward. Life in a 'career' army becomes very complicated. Personal motivation can be split two ways: between the logical requirements of the job, and the irrational demands of superiors who must be obeyed and satisfied if the individual is to be promoted. All successful career soldiers must master this essentially political system – as amusingly but often accurately depicted in Sergeant Bilko!

Peacetime armed forces resemble any large organisation, with petty politics and high levels of bureaucratic and social stress. Two additional factors increase the stress beyond that found in civilian life: military rank and commitment. Military rank and authority are absolute, so unlike in a civilian office, there is little effective recourse available to a disgruntled subordinate. Commitment is long term, which forcibly prevents a subordinate from walking out on a superior. But more importantly, good soldiers suffer in silence because they are proud of their units and care about what they are doing.

In peacetime, life in the Armed Forces is a peculiar mixture of military preparedness in the shadow of war, and boredom. This has long been recognised. In the past, when less time was spent on equipment maintenance and large-scale exercises, the officer class in particular was able to revel in sports and games: riding, hunting, shooting, pig-sticking and so on. The use of alcohol is an institutionalised ritual for all ranks in the British Army, to the extent that in some units, not drinking is considered a sign of weakness. The US Armed Forces, by contrast, are particularly strict about not drinking during working hours. Many units do not have a real job to do in peacetime, so they invent activities: inspections, complicated administration, tests and training exercises.

Armed Forces need good people to make them work. Without suitable men and women in the appropriate jobs, and the best leaders out in front, neither technology, nor training, nor sheer force of

numbers can win wars. The pyramid shape of any military organisation contains large numbers of low-level leaders who at the same time are also being led by those above them in the structure. The type and quality of military leadership is therefore the single most significant determinant of what one might call the psychological tone of the organisation – the attitudes, lifestyles and social structure within which everybody lives and works.

In all armies, good leaders must also be good followers. In Western armies, there is no clear dividing line between leaders and followers; even the men at the very base of the pyramid structure are considered potential leaders and trained accordingly. Professional, career troops expect promotion at regular intervals, so very soon after leaving basic training each person becomes a leader. Leadership is dynamic and shapes every aspect of life in the Armed Forces, for better and for worse.

The psychology (and tradition) behind the concepts of leadership practised in various armies is fundamental to the way their soldiers are motivated, and to the way they fight. It also determines how the individual reacts to the traumatic experience of combat. Psychological tone is possibly even more important in armies than in navies or air forces because of the numbers of people involved. An army has many more people in its ranks; as individuals they are the weapons with which the war is fought. Navies and air forces use their people to crew ships and aircraft, to operate the technology and service the machinery that does the fighting for them. Individual soldiers must actually be able to kill the enemy. Their discipline, obedience, group cohesion, team spirit, training, all of which create high morale, are determined by leadership, in peacetime as well as in war.

The only product of a peacetime army, navy or air force, apart from the intangible deterring of potential aggressors and the providing of aid to civilian authorities in times of national disaster, is the capacity to select and nurture the right military leaders who will keep the forces up to combat standard in peace, and win battles if war is necessary. One inescapable paradox is that the men who rise to the top in peace are not always the best war leaders. Peacetime armed forces are caught in the dilemma of knowing that many of their leaders may not be cut out for war, but needing to have careful, bureaucratic individuals keeping the military machine ready to fight. Of course there were many excellent peacetime leaders in World War Two: Auchinleck, Wavell, Slim, Dempsey, Horrocks and so on. But the immediate demands of peacetime override those of some future, theoretical war – which everyone hopes in their hearts is never going to happen. Volatile men of outstanding combat ability, like Patton or Montgomery (whose feud with each other would never have been

tolerated by a peacetime commander-in-chief), rarely get the chance to prove their worth in peace, being too unpopular with superiors to be promoted.[18]

Ordinary soldiers also suffer from this same paradox. 'Fighters' can seem over-keen on practising their military skills to be tolerated in peacetime units. Elite cadres like the British SAS attract men frustrated by the peacetime attitudes of their parent units. These men are often identified by their officers as being both particularly good at their jobs, and likely to perform well in combat. Nevertheless, in peacetime, other qualities are required to earn promotion – especially tact and diplomacy. In peacetime, these combat-capable individuals are often passed-over in favour of other more personable men.

Before he had experienced battle, Second World War infantry platoon commander Sydney Jary said he would have listed masculine qualities like aggression, physical stamina, a competitive nature and hunting instinct as the necessary qualities of a good soldier. But after fighting from 1944 until the end of the war, from Normandy into Germany, his list of good soldier qualities had changed radically:

> "…sufferance, without which one could not survive. Secondly a quiet mind which enables the soldier to live in harmony with his fellows through all sorts of difficulty and dreadful conditions… there is simply no room for the assertive or acrimonious. Thirdly… a sense of the ridiculous, which helps the soldier surmount the unacceptable. Add to these physical fitness and professional competence and you have a soldier for all seasons.[19]

Given the choice between sportsmen and poets for a dangerous mission, Jary declares he 'would unhesitatingly recruit from the latter', men who in peacetime would probably not even have joined the army, let alone been considered for promotion.

The armed forces of many countries are an interesting reflection of the social structure of the rest of their societies. Each is organised according to the nature of the society that it serves and defends. Some armed forces epitomise the ideology of the governing class and its attempts to shape the social order: the erstwhile Soviet Union and China clearly so; and, more subtly, the English class system and the American egalitarian myth.

Through its regimental system, the British Army perpetuates an obsolescent dream of English upper-middle-class life. Technology and the need for intelligent, well-trained men in all ranks have largely eliminated this from the Royal Navy and the RAF. By contrast, the US Army's classless officer corps selects its members from the same backgrounds as the men, but then has the problem of making them

different enough from the other ranks to stand out as officers. The Israeli Defence Force avoids all these problems by selecting officers from the best NCOs.

Ironically, soldierly skill is not nearly so important for a British Army officer. In the conformist environment of a British officers' mess, social standing can be more important, not only with other officers, but particularly with the other ranks. In Highland regiments, for example, many of the men prefer their officers to speak with upper-class English accents. In regiments like the Guards, the men like their officers to be 'toffs', partly because in the past they have often been absurdly brave and colourful – but more importantly, perhaps, because toffs are predictable. A public school education is the usual pre-requisite, conferring the accent and social habits, plus the connections. These days, private incomes are less common, although there are plenty who have no real need for their army pay, and a few who don't bother drawing it.

The influence of class in the British Army is far stronger than in most other parts of British society, which keep mostly within their own class boundaries. Each regiment is a microcosm in which people of every social class work unusually closely together. Military rank is more important among the other ranks than between officers. For officers, status is much more a question of education and social class than of military rank. The noble lord who is only a lieutenant does not feel inferior to the majors. Because the smartest regiments take officers mainly from the upper classes, the regimental cap badge becomes an indication of the individual's class – except in the unlikely event of a particular upper-class individual 'slumming it' in a lower-class regiment.

There are notable examples of upper-class chaps refusing to become officers, enjoying the camaraderie of the barrack block in preference to the regimentation of the Officers' Mess. Most seem to leave the Army or get talked into becoming officers; before having to come to terms with the ultra-conformity of the Sergeants Mess.

In a staff headquarters, although officers from different regiments and corps work together, the horizontal social hierarchy (based firmly upon class and not rank) continues strongly, and can create pretension and occasional strife. Officers from the Ordnance, Engineers, Artillery and the ultra-technical Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME) are often attached to smart regiments. Any one of these might drop aitches or hold his knife at table as if it was a pen. On peacetime exercises, social superiority and inferiority can adversely affect the integration of these vital specialists into the organisation. How words are pronounced can be as important as their meaning.

As an institution the British Army lives in the past – and not

simply because of its traditions. Its isolation from the rest of society offers a purely social reason for it being so class-oriented. This isolation was particularly apparent in the British Army of the Rhine, and the time lag is significant, something in the order of a decade and more. Within the institution of the army, individuals behave, dress and think according to their own inclinations, but conform to the official, time-lagged, upper-class norm when required. A small number of officers and NCOs blot out their private persona, being and living exactly in the army's image. As such officers achieve promotion, this will stand them in good stead. An even smaller number (less so in 2014 than in my day) are so pukka as to try to live as an officer might have done for example in India between the wars. They are regarded by most as eccentrics, but this does not harm their promotion prospects – rather the opposite.

English public schools epitomise the English class system, and are very important to the British Army. Lt Colonel Tim Spicer (Scots Guards, educated at Sherborne – a (fee-paying) public school):

> "Public schools drum into their pupils the need to set a good example, and provide the means to becoming a good, overall sort of chap. The public-school boy tends to be naturally better at the sort of leadership required by the British Army because he has been practising it throughout his school life. Although other sorts of school might also provide individuals who happen to be good leaders, they do not give them the same tremendous advantage – and head start."

Of course not all public-school boys do well in the army; some fail on entry, and others survive without really pulling their weight. The public-school boys who get to the top of the army usually have the added advantage of brain power, which adds up to being the best sort of officer leader.

By coming straight into the Army, a public-school boy moves from one institution to another, compounding the narrowness of his outlook. (This happens in other professions too, the law in particular.) Narrow-mindedness is inevitable, which in the Army (where the upper and lower classes of British society work together with unparalleled intimacy) could become an increasingly serious disadvantage. Lt Colonel Spicer:

> "Eton College gives possibly the broadest approach to life and a better understanding of the outside world. Etonians do well in the Army, and in combat. Colonel 'H' Jones [the Commanding Officer of 2 Para in the Falklands

> War] went to Eton. Public school gives an advantage in the army because of a general inhibition [held by army officers] about those who went to other schools – that they might eat their peas with a knife or something."

However good the qualities they promote, public schools cast a divisive shadow over life in the officer corps of the modern British Army. Public-school manners and self-confidence are easily recognisable standards of behaviour that the army believes are synonymous with being an officer. Thus officers who did not go to public school (the majority) can feel at a disadvantage, socially inferior, even to the extent of not being 'proper' officers.

Inside the British Army, the effect of institutionalised snobbery is insidious and widespread, although few would admit that it even exists. To a varying extent it inhibits individuals from doing and saying what they actually think. Peacetime army life can be highly stressful for those who continually have to keep up socially. Because such people can never entirely relax and be themselves, their lives become unnecessarily uncomfortable – regimented in every sense.

All armies have elite units that attract the best officers and soldiers, and are accepted as having the highest military standards. The British Army, however, is unique in that it has two sorts of elite unit: military elites like the SAS and the Parachute Regiment; and socially elite units like the Life Guards, Foot Guards and Cavalry. This concept of socially elite units is essentially European, the product of military history and tradition – today's social elites being yesterday's military elites.

The idea of a privileged officer caste monopolising units like the Household Cavalry would be intolerable to the Israeli Defence Force, although Israel's best soldiers do come from the best-educated and most prosperous strata of Israeli society. The IDF exists only to ensure the survival of the State of Israel and is therefore geared solely to war. The elitism of IDF units is related to public opinion, based upon well-informed public knowledge of units' performance in combat operations. The units deemed most significant in the defence of Israel have the best reputations.

While there is no doubt of the quality of the British Army's military elite units, in recent years its socially elite units have been nothing like so consistent. It could be argued that the Household Cavalry and Foot Guards demonstrate high standards by doing two jobs – public duties and normal military training. However, public duties, such as mounting guard at St James's Palace and Buckingham Palace, turning out to receive foreign dignitaries and rehearsing parades – all in London – are a daily grind. They simply do not allow

time for more than rudimentary military training, achieving standards about equal to those of a Territorial Army unit – according to an Irish Guards company commander.

The difference in military capability between socially elite regiments and military elite units in one respect may not be as unequal as it seems. Winning modern battles on the playing fields of Eton might sound ridiculous, but it is undeniably true that the British upper classes have always produced good soldiers, from top generals to unconventional fighters like David Stirling (who started the SAS) and Lord Lovat. Nobody can deny that the socially elite Scots Guards were successful in achieving an apparently impossible five-week transformation from public duties in London to being combat-effective in the Falklands. It must also be said that their success was due to the realistic leadership of their professional and perceptive Commanding Officer, and not to their Guards antecedents.

Socially elite regiments believe that somehow their social status will translate itself into an equal level of military expertise. This attitude is a form of self-delusion drawn from a deep well of collective overconfidence, which under an unrealistic Commanding Officer can become dangerous. (Believing your own PR has also brought down many high-flying business organisations and individuals.) Socially elite units, believing themselves to be inherently good, tend to attempt to 'cuff' or 'wing it' without proper preparation, with the result that unrealistically difficult exercises are imposed on undertrained troops who make a mess of them (which their CO then covers up). The individual soldiers in these regiments are also expected to be elite, to avoid making mistakes regardless of their standard of training. According to an army psychiatrist, the pressure this can place on some men leads to psychotic reactions.

Military elite units approach training with a very different attitude, incorporating an intimate knowledge of their soldiers' limitations. The 'invincible' SAS rehearse everything they do ad nauseam, as would a professional theatre company. The standard and difficulty of training is steadily built up until the required level is reached. A British Army psychiatrist:

> "The special units have got the psychology of it right: keeping people within their capabilities, then training them well beyond the standard of that required in war. They have tight-knit groups, which stay together, and train for jobs exhaustively, in manageable parts. Some people can do certain things well, and are not so good at other things. Nobody can do everything well. The army is not good at being honest about this.

> These social elites need to be brought down to earth, from the fantasy of fancy ceremonial. Regimental tradition is all right, but all the donkeywork has to be done by the soldiers – who enjoy the military side of their jobs, but usually not the ceremonial. What are these socially elite units actually better at? They have this irrational feeling of superiority, but what is it actually based on?"

In any army it's healthy for units to believe they are the best. Social elitism in the British Army however, is far deeper than that, being based solely upon the class of the officers. The socially elite units in the British Army identify completely with their own perceived social status. Their officers socialise with each other rather than with officers of lesser regiments, and their soldiers feel themselves to be the best because their officers are the best – from the top public schools and top-drawer families. The subject of military efficiency does not arise where pedigree and quality are beyond question.

The list of socially elite regiments is headed by the Household Cavalry, then the Foot Guards and some of the Cavalry regiments. The now-amalgamated Royal Green Jackets (infantry) slid into this batting order near the top. Some regiments are considered less elite than others; the cavalry talked disparagingly of the 'vulgar fractions' (regiments like the former 15/19 King's Hussars or the 9/12th Lancers), and the infantry of 'fish and chip' regiments.

The importance of an established pecking order among British regiments has long been recognised. The strict precedence of British Army regiments is actually laid down in Queen's Regulations, the more senior regiments positioned 'to the right of the line'. Today the official precedence of Queen's Regulations is hopelessly out of date in social terms. When 'right of the line' is quoted, the Royal Artillery on parade with its guns takes the premier position, which everyone would agree does not demonstrate its current social superiority. Despite the strict ordering of QRs, psychological elitism remains competitive and based upon the perceptions of the regiments themselves.

Initiation ceremonies are very basic human events, carried out by all societies. Unofficial military initiations are additional to that provided officially by basic training, and can be seen as a sign that the members of the regimental 'club' do not respect the selectivity of basic training. Their aim is to degrade the initiate, cutting him down to size before permitting him into 'club' membership. There have been tragedies, and countless other narrow and very frightening escapes. In one case, a boy was tied to a chair then thrown from a second floor window. He was so badly affected by this, he started drinking and was

eventually medically boarded and left the army, because he constantly associated green uniforms with this terrifying experience.

Initiation ceremonies are particularly common among the soldiers of socially elite regiments. The Household Cavalry, for example, would dunk new men into various unpleasant horsy by-products. Hair has been cropped and boot polish smeared on parts of the anatomy. Military elite units have no need for this kind of ritual as each man has already been initiated by the severe military selection process through which each man must go. Although he must then earn the respect of his sub-unit, this uses purely military criteria. Initiation ceremonies have received so much bad press that they have become serious offences. And so, the adjutants of many battalions simply deny that they take place.

Some elite regiments also make new officers undergo 'initiations' – usually at the hands of the young, unmarried captains and senior lieutenants who live in the Officers Mess. This was done to them, so in turn they carry it on the next 'generation'. This involves an illegal presumption of 'offences' and 'punishments', in which the young officers are 'fined' bottles or even crates of port and champagne, which their persecutors drink. Often this also includes the more usual – but nevertheless unofficial – imposition of 'extras' as Orderly Officer, which the Adjutant supports in his rostering of 'offenders' according to the dictates of the persecutors.

This 'Flashman' type behaviour leads to things like – to my personal knowledge of recent events [2014] – ordering young officers to remove their issue shirts, which are burned on the anteroom fire; games with crossbows where young officers are ordered to stand with apples on their heads (my informant for this one refused, and underwent further ostracisation and difficulty). The captains demand that junior officers remain with them drinking heavily and playing often violent games. Victims who retreat to their rooms have their doors chopped down with fire axes, rooms sprayed with fire extinguishers, to be dragged often naked back to the 'party'.

These initiations are all nothing less than bullying, which, because the victims have no military experience, they feel powerless to challenge. However, as with all bullies, these situations must be resolutely challenged – which might require calling in the Military Police as these situations always involve breaches of military discipline. But these problems are very hard to sort out, especially for the inexperienced victims. Recent revelations of 75 allegations of rape and 150 sex assaults between 2011 and 2013 by Military Police on their female colleagues, ended up with only 5 rape convictions and 22 assault convictions. This only came to light when a 30-yearold Military Police corporal hanged herself after being victimised for two

years after being raped by two male colleagues, and her superiors refusing to take disciplinary action.

The Guards, Household Cavalry and some other regiments, despite their regular denials, have also practised an informal but active colour bar. For their soldiers, regimental tradition has acquired a Masonic quality that has nothing to do with military efficiency, in which the members of the regiment take it upon themselves to decide who will be admitted. As an Irish Guards officer said to me in the 1980s: 'The Micks would never tolerate a black man in their regiment.' This sort of xenophobia seems to be breaking down in these regiments, but probably only to the extent of high-calibre individuals being tolerated – or perhaps becoming regimental 'mascots'. At the Falklands War 25th Anniversary parade on Whitehall, 2 Para's right marker was a large black man with dreadlocks, his maroon beret perched precariously on top. This veteran was an obviously very popular member of the battalion.

The position of ordinary soldiers in socially elite regiments is very different to the egalitarian mutual respect of the military elites. In upper-class regiments soldiers were often little more than servants to the officers and senior NCOs. Private soldiers had to polish the boots and ceremonial uniforms of officers, which is certainly not what most of them joined the army for. In other regiments, such impositions would be regarded as degrading. This survives to an extent in the 'socially elite' regiments, and Guards battalions doing public duties, in the way the officers leave the NCOs and soldiers to manage and do most of the training and maintenance work.

Although the vital logistic services like ordnance, transport, electrical and mechanical engineers should be highly regarded by military men, the sad fact is that they are often looked down upon as 'tradesmen'. Some other armies share this cavalier attitude towards their logisticians. The 'Teeth Arms' who do the fighting feel superior to the Service Corps, who try to take comfort from doing an essential job, but nevertheless feel inferior.

At the end of officer training, the Service Corps become the last resort of the less able or less well-regarded officer cadets. In Zugbach's sociological study of Sandhurst in the mid-seventies, only one logistic service officer admitted to having wanted to be commissioned into his corps.[20] All the others would have preferred to go to a teeth arm. This seems still to be the case today.

The status of non-combat arm officers in the Israeli Defence Force is even worse. They are actively discriminated against, rarely being promoted before the minimum time limit and always slower than combat officers. Non-combat officers with specialist qualifications (doctors, attorneys, engineers) receive only one month's basic training

and three months' officer training. This is very similar to that given to British Army 'vicars and tarts' courses for padres, lawyers *et al*. Although these specialists join the IDF directly as officers, they are not given the same respect, nor regarded as 'proper' officers.

A British Army psychiatrist believes that Service Corps personnel maintain personal self-respect by concentrating on their technical expertise: 'The Service Corps see themselves as superior technicians and the infantry and armour as cannon fodder. Without fuel and transport, the tanks and infantry are useless.' This defence is fragile, particularly as these people often work on attachment to smarter regiments:

> "The socially elite units have fewer of their people commissioned through the ranks. When the Service Corps mix with these regiments, very experienced ex-rankers come up against very inexperienced, upper-class officers who they feel are behaving in an unreasonably superior manner, causing great tension. Defence mechanisms are elaborate and very divisive, and the ex-ranker has no acceptable or secure basis on which he can answer back.
>
> A Service Corps officer, promoted from the ranks, attached to a smart regiment, does not feel a full member of the team – because of the social difference. In war, he is likely to feel very isolated. Also, because he is a military expert with over twenty years' experience, he will be much more experienced than the officers of the regiment to which he is attached. This becomes a serious problem when delegation is exercised."

Delegation is a vital management skill in the Armed Forces, as in any organisation. There is a fine line between letting subordinates take decisions and offloading onerous responsibilities.

The 'dumping' of responsibilities downwards is very common in peacetime armies. The expertise of logistics and service corps officers makes them prime targets, and they usually end up doing all the work, particularly if they are older, more experienced men, former warrant officers commissioned from the ranks: 'Inevitably, a lot of real and serious problems will be dumped on the ex-ranker – problems deemed too mundane for the 'proper' regimental officers to be bothered with. In fact the regimental officers rarely have the experience to solve the stores, transport, maintenance and repair problems that ex-rankers handle.'

In war, this practice is potentially disastrous as these few individuals end up shouldering an enormous personal burden of worry. Having 'dumped' responsibility (and perhaps interest), their

superiors are unlikely to understand the problems these people face. Torn between the demands of superiors and the double burden of their jobs and responsibilities, they may be more likely to become psychological casualties than their 'teeth arm' comrades.

The army is supposed to be one big happy family, a stable structure, carefully layered, with everyone knowing his or her place within the system. In fact, below the surface things are not quite so happy, and the similarities to a family become even more apparent. In psychological terms, family dynamics can be applied to the services as a whole, to the army as a whole, and to each of the regiments and units. Like all biological families, there are times when the military family is happy, and other times when it is distinctly miserable.

The regiment is the most traditional and well-known of the army's family units. Artillery batteries are closer, tighter and smaller, and much more independent than their infantry or armoured equivalents (companies and squadrons). The regimental family has its CO as the father figure, its adopted and foster children who don't quite fit in (for example the REME Light Aid Detachment commander and his troop), its cousins who are tolerated (the artillery battery commander and his forward observation officers) – and also its enemies.

It is common (and traditional) for young men from broken homes to join the army in order to belong to a family. The British Army's image (and peculiar tribalism) has always been that of a close-knit family, although in the last two decades recruiters have made efforts to compare it favourably with industry – as a 'caring employer' or industrial skills trainer.

When the family of the army is happy and working, the system works very well. In war its purpose is quite clear and, because military units are tailor-made for war, everything falls into place: the military family's *raison d'etre* being to fight. In peacetime, however, when war is considered to be unlikely, the aims of the military family can become confused, and relations within it strained and uncertain. The family identity becomes all-important, and must be defended. Soldiers from different regiments fight each other off duty; young officers raid the messes of their rivals; regimental headquarters try to deflect on to rival regiments unreasonable demands for manpower from brigade and divisional headquarters. Preparation for war is taken less seriously than 'doing well' on exercises – which are two completely different things. Competing against rival regiments, 'for the honour of the regiment', or impressing the Commander can become the aims of peacetime training.

Competition can be a substitute for war and bind units together, but can also become an expression of the ability of individual COs as

they jockey with the other COs in their formation for position in the promotion race. Difficulties may be glossed over and short-cuts taken, to the extent that people come to believe that what they are doing is realistic preparation for war. At the bottom of the rank structure, the soldiers are well aware when things are not being done properly, but learn to play the same game. Training becomes routine and predictable. The important thing is never to be caught out making a mistake. Unfortunately, war is far from being predictable; and so is characterised by mistakes being made all the time. The secret of survival in war is to be able to recover from mistakes in time, the key scenario that much peacetime training never addresses.

The unreality of peacetime training also makes it difficult to keep teams together and practise effectively. So many compromises are made to achieve peacetime ends, that soldiers can become confused about their real roles. As a result, the military family loses cohesion, which adversely affects its battle efficiency.

Most military promotion systems are based upon the judgement of officers as to the suitability of their subordinates. In the British Army, platoon commanders evaluate their soldiers and junior NCOs; company commanders, commanding officers, brigade commanders and so on evaluate the officers immediately below them; writing detailed reports, then supporting (or amending) the reports written by those officers on their immediate subordinates. Officers are judged on their ability to judge, as well as how they lead and administer.

The promotion of the right men at the right time, and the selection of the best candidates for responsible posts, is the single most important administrative task in any army. Good men passed over for promotion too often become unhappy; and inadequate men promoted to positions of responsibility become liabilities. Therefore it is logical (and essential) for armed forces to devote considerable effort to running promotion systems that train and promote the right people to the right jobs at the right time.

Up to 1941, British regiments selected officers primarily by means of interviews that ruled out people from the wrong backgrounds – regardless of their ability. By 1942, expansion and casualties had seriously depleted the officer corps and more were required. The interview system, in which public schools, fathers' regiments, private incomes and so on were used to determine the social status of candidates, was not producing enough men of the right quality. Up to half the officer candidates were failing their training courses, with high levels of psychological breakdown. At the same time, many suitable candidates, in every way perfect, some proven in combat but lacking the right education and social background, remained in the ranks, reluctant to push for a commission, believing that the selection

system was prejudiced against them.

The Adjutant General of the time, General Sir Ronald Adam, decided that psychological tests were required to override the highly subjective character judgement by which officers were then selected. These tests were to be a yardstick independent of the social standing of candidates. The 'Bion Leaderless Group Test' was devised. Groups of strangers were set a complicated task, then watched closely to see how each contributed. Some took charge, others followed; some worked wholeheartedly towards the group aim and others did nothing. A formal selection course was developed, which in time became the model for officer selection tests in the armies of several other countries. These new psychological tests were very carefully evaluated by the British Army, and were discovered to equate accurately to the subsequent performance of candidates on officer training courses. In the first six months of the implementation of the new tests, when it became known throughout the army that class-determining questions about schooling and private income were no longer part of officer selection, 25 percent more applicants for commissions came forward.

The army's suspicion of psychologists parallels that of the general public. Giving the vital job of officer selection to 'shrinks' was doubly perplexing and worrying for senior officers as it seemed to cast doubt on one of their most vital skills. Army officers have always been used to judging and evaluating men; it is considered a stock in trade, like a gentleman's ability to ascertain the soundness of a horse, or the steadiness of a gun dog. So using psychologists to select the raw material for the British Army's officer caste was seen by some as an insult, and by others as an unfortunate necessity of war – to be dispensed with as soon as possible afterwards. The military establishment resisted the new tests, but high-powered champions of the new system (Field Marshal Auchinleck for one) held sway until 1948 when the psychologists were voted off the selection boards.

The army then slipped back into its old ways, which even today still play a part in the way some individual regiments select new officers. The army's formal officer aptitude selection (the Regular Commissions Board) is regarded by the smarter regiments as merely one of various inconvenient hoops through which the individuals they have chosen must jump. The Guards and Household Cavalry, in particular, choose only from the 'gentry', giving weight to family pedigree and existing family ties with the regiment. Today, psychologists do not play an active part in officer or soldier selection, although psychological tests are widely used and military staff may have some psychological training. During officer selection for the SAS, an anonymous psychologist is reputed to sleuth around the officers' mess eavesdropping on the conversations of candidates, but his views

would certainly not be afforded anything like the same emphasis as those of the selection course instructors.

The Regular Commissions Board – now known as the Army Officer Selection Board (AOSB), takes three days and is partly physical, looking for the potential to become an officer. The individual assault course is a particularly interesting test of fitness, agility and strength, cleverly coupled with judgement and quick thinking. There are also group discussions, written papers, interviews and psychological tests, all carefully observed by Board selection officers. The RCB looks for a type of leadership described by sociologists as 'leader-centred'. It believes in what it calls 'natural leadership' (a stereotype very clearly understood by Board staff), selecting those who are able to alternate easily between leading and following; as all military leaders, regardless of seniority, must take orders from someone else. The RCB tends to reject democratically inclined leaders as 'not hard enough' or 'indecisive'. 'Positive' candidates are preferred, the sort who might push others aside in their keenness to lead. According to von Zugbach, autocratic and authoritarian personalities are favoured. Precocious types tend to fare badly, being judged immature, perhaps being invited to try again in a year or so.

According to another categorisation of leadership, into Types A and B, the Regular Commissions Board selects Type A leaders – the noisy, extrovert, authoritarian ones – while discounting Type B leaders, who are quiet, thoughtful and inward-looking, leading quietly and without fuss. Several studies show that in the stress of combat, Type A leaders tend to become subdued to the point where their leadership is ineffective, whereas Type B leaders continue quietly as they had always done, in the process drawing their men even closer to them, increasing the effectiveness of their leadership. The combat experience of many individuals to whom I have spoken corroborates this. RCB selectors like robust, outward-looking people, who engage in tough, manly activities. In sociological terms, they exercise 'anti-intraception', disliking introspection and tender-mindedness in candidates (as might be manifested in writing poetry or playing musical instruments, for example).

Independent psychological testing of successful RCB candidates has revealed stronger Super Egos and weaker Egos than in a control group of civilians. (The Freudian 'Super Ego' can be loosely translated into military terminology as 'sense of duty'.) The same testing revealed weaker Ids in the military group (less primitive drive and creativity). Translated into English, RCB chooses individuals likely to be dominated by their sense of duty, but less able to satisfy their instinctual drives (libido), a personality that could to some extent became unbalanced or frustrated. These psychological tests also noted

‘much higher levels of authoritarian aggression’ in successful candidates; ‘a tendency to condemn, reject and punish people who violate conventional values’.[21]

This rejection of ‘people who violate conventional values’ is an important aspect of RCB selection. In a complicated social system like the army, individuals must fit in without difficulty. To an extent candidates need to understand and accept the social conventions of the army before they join – hence the preponderance of individuals with parents or close family already in the army. The RCB will not take risks with unconventional candidates, regardless of how admirable they might be in other ways. The stakes are simply too high. In enforcing the army’s conventional values, RCB selectors practise stereotyping, identifying categories into which individuals can be accurately placed. All army officers learn to judge and categorise men, developing their skills on serving soldiers. However, in entering the army, completing basic training and joining a particular regiment, soldiers are already very thoroughly categorised. RCB stereotyping is therefore to an extent flawed through the use of military stereotypes to judge civilians – a very different animal. Candidates who do not fit the RCB’s stereotype image are rejected, often for showing ‘argumentativeness’ or a ‘lack of clarity of thought’. Intellectuals are regarded with hostility and suspicion, deemed ‘too clever to see the plain facts’. Deviance from middle-class norms is considered ‘weakness of character’ or ‘immaturity’.

Zugbach commented: ‘RCB punishes by giving low grades to those who deviate from their consensus of conventionality, and high grades to those who conform.’[22]

It must however be said that RCB’s experience is unparalleled. It makes relatively few mistakes.

Because of the enormous social differences between regiments, the RCB is the British Army’s standard yardstick, the common denominator from which all its leaders are selected. The Board is expected to identify future officers from wildly differing backgrounds. The aristocracy, intending to enter the Household Cavalry, the Guards or a cavalry regiment, compete with the sons of working men (who would not be welcome in those and other similar regiments). In fact, working-class candidates try hard and do well at RCB, possibly because they have nothing to lose.

Zugbach believes, however, that subsequent success in the army requires individuals to reject their working-class origins, a burning of bridges that happens in other professions but is particularly important where there is a very rigid correlation between rank and apparent social class. The vast majority of RCB candidates are middle-class, from military backgrounds. Moving sideways, from one institution

into a very similar military version, public-school boys are on familiar ground. The process of socialisation into the army is very much easier for them, and they find their feet to out-perform others much earlier. The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst is highly competitive; places in the best regiments have to be won against stiff opposition. A head start is a huge advantage, and in any case, the smarter regiments prefer public-school boys.

Although it would be absurd to equate young people from Israeli kibbutzim and moshavim with British public-school boys, communal living does create a sense of social duty that is peculiarly suited to military life. Kibbutzniks and moshavim members do particularly well in Israeli Defence Force aptitude tests – known as 'kaba'. The lower kaba scores tend to come from under-privileged families, often immigrants from Islamic states (Sephardim). Israel's population is small by comparison with the potentially hostile nations that surround it. In defending the nation, the Israeli Defence Force must make the best military use of the population, carefully selecting conscripts for exactly the right jobs. Their sophisticated selection procedure was developed for this purpose, to grade recruits initially, and then be updated throughout an individual's career, to be used for his or her selection as an NCO and officer, and for subsequent appointments and promotions.

Unlike the British Army's Sum Selection Grading tests (SSG) used to measure British recruits' potential on entry to the army, kaba is used throughout soldiers' careers and is particularly useful for charting their progress in comparison with that of their peers. The word 'kaba' is an acronym for a Hebrew phrase meaning 'quality category'. Kaba calculates a 'quality group score' for each individual by measuring intelligence, formal education, and command of the Hebrew language. (Many conscripts are recent immigrants and may not have learned Hebrew. Each IDF soldier must at least be able to read a written order, fill in a form and understand the spoken word.) The final and most important kaba index, which is determined by interview, measures the individual's personal motivation to serve, particularly in a combat unit. Known as 'Tsadach', this measure is not applied to women.

The kaba indices work by identifying three categories of recruit: low quality (with scores of 41 to 46), moderate (47-50) and high quality (51-56). The very best become pilots, naval officers, high-grade technicians and special unit personnel. Most graded 'high' will go on to become NCOs or officers. (All officers score between 51 and 56, with the NCOs spread from around 47 upwards.) Those graded 'moderate' go to logistic units, and the lowest category to auxiliary units for non-combat jobs. Both the 'high' and 'moderate' categories

are earmarked for combat units, where failure (in action) can least be tolerated. The tests are first taken in the year before conscription, allowing IDF planners to calculate how many potential officers, paratroopers, pilots etc. it can expect from each new intake of conscripts. In addition to getting the right people into the right jobs, kaba is therefore a vital planning tool to allow the optimal utilisation of Israel's very limited human resources. Furthermore, after much experience and investigation, the IDF have found that kaba scores relate very closely to the subsequent performance of individuals in battle, which makes it possible for IDF planners to go one stage further and evaluate accurately the battle potential of their units and staff them with the right people.

Israeli experience over many years has proved that conscripts from prosperous, well-educated, 'comfortable' families obtain by far the best kaba scores, and go on to do correspondingly well in combat. Thus, in Israeli society, conscripts from the upper classes make the most useful and most highly motivated soldiers – a deduction that the Duke of Wellington would certainly have agreed with.

In the British Army, the advantage of a good education (at a public school) increases as an officer rises through the officer ranks. In the seventies, virtually every general of three stars and higher in the British Army was a former public-school boy[23] with around a quarter of them having been to Eton. It would be impossible to determine the extent to which the ability nurtured by public schools and the accompanying style and manners contribute respectively to these statistics; but the predominance of former public-school boys at the top of the army ensures their domination of the initial selection process, and of their values in later army life.

The whole process of military training and promotion is full of paradoxes. Leadership is very difficult to measure and test. Superiors tend to judge subordinates using themselves as the standard, giving the most credit to those whose leadership (and personal style) most exactly resembles their own. In turn, ambitious subordinates learn to act like their superiors. Leaders tend therefore to be chosen according to their ability to follow, rather than their ability to do things in their own way. A free spirit is unlikely to do well – at least in peacetime. Those who accept and obey are more rapidly promoted to high rank than those who raise objections. The ability to think can therefore be a serious handicap, as breadth of thought is not required of young officers. In the lower echelons of the army particularly, those who think and evaluate the world for themselves can be at a distinct disadvantage to those who merely accept. Thinkers waste time and mental energy when action is required. Military men generally are intolerant of ambiguity and of those who question. And yet after

decades of obedience and confining thought to very narrow bands of concern, when an officer reaches the upper echelons of the army, thinking suddenly becomes a required part of the job.

Another dimension of military conformism is that in order for anybody at any rank to be successful in the army, the correct image is vital, tailored to the particular requirements (or idiosyncrasies) of one's immediate superior. As an individual advances up the promotion ladder, his deference to authority must grow, until it extends well beyond that necessary in combat, dominating his behaviour (and possibly that of his wife) even at social events during off-duty hours. The psychologist Norman F. Dixon believes that the end result of all this complicated moulding and self-constriction is to make military men over-cautious. When playing the promotion game in a peacetime army, it is important not to rock the boat. It can be dangerous to use your own knowledge to influence superiors who, because nobody speaks frankly to them, are likely to be out of touch with events. This happens all the time in Ministries of Defence across the globe.

The overriding need to conform has a psychiatric dimension too. Conforming is so important in military life that quite minor behavioural aberrations can become problems: sleepwalking for example. An acceptable response to such things is to refer the nonconformists to military psychiatrists. A soldier who, after his girlfriend had jilted him, stole a tank and until capture drove around wrecking an army camp, would be regarded by military men as mad. However, without certain symptoms, for example voices which told him to do it, he could only be diagnosed as suffering from an 'acute situational disturbance'. He would certainly not be considered psychiatrically ill. Despite military discipline, bad behaviour does not equate to psychiatric disorder, in the same way that chest pain alone does not indicate a heart attack, or headache a brain tumour. In the army, the idea that a regiment could produce a soldier capable of such criminal misuse of military hardware is unthinkable. Military selection and training cannot be thought capable of producing such irresponsible people; what might a joyrider with a 175mm howitzer or Rapier anti-aircraft missile system be capable of doing?

The official, almost knee-jerk reaction of superior headquarters when incidents of this sort occur is to examine the general standard of discipline in the regiment concerned, with the implication that the incident 'was allowed to happen'. A traditional view is that private soldiers are not supposed to be responsible for anything themselves (as an artillery CO once told me). Following this logic, the joy-rider's spree of destruction must therefore be the result of either poor leadership or sudden madness. For the sake of the career of the man's Commanding Officer, it is more convenient that army psychiatrists

declare the soldier mentally ill (an aberrant individual, so nothing to do with the regiment), letting the CO and his regiment off the hook.

Military discipline puts tremendous pressure on individuals to conform, and this is particularly stressful as the purpose of military discipline is to make people do things they don't actually want to do. When a private soldier is promoted, he moves from being one of the disciplined, to become a leader and discipliner. He is suddenly expected to take charge of his former fellows and friends, with only a single 'tape' on his arm as authority. This first promotion is an added burden, for with only one tape, he remains firmly among the ranks of the disciplined, but with additional responsibilities. On the promotion ladder, this first step is easily the most difficult, and many experienced soldiers have been demoted at this stage several times (usually for misbehaviour while celebrating).

The promotion of an individual upsets the established balance of a group, particularly when privates are promoted. Those who were not promoted (but perhaps felt they should have been) are often not prepared to examine their own deficiencies, and can become very bitter about the army, their careers and about life in general. They may become critical of authority, and adopt an injured, surly attitude that hampers or prevents their due promotion, fuelling their feelings of injustice.

The stress created by promotions is felt very much more among other ranks than among officers, although when officers reach certain critical career points (being 'pink-listed' for promotion to Lt Colonel for example), disappointments can be felt very keenly. Individuals who have devoted their lives to getting on in the army can find being passed over for promotion (while seeing their contemporaries listed) very hard to bear. Such people usually have few interests outside the army or army life. Not being promoted can seem like being rejected; I knew personally one major who committed suicide after not appearing on the promotion list.

Such desperate disappointment is unbalanced, particularly as in such people it is based on an exaggeration of their own military worth. Throughout their careers they have usually been ultra-conformist, giving their all in order to be promoted. Having subordinated everything in their lives to the army (wife, family, private interests and so on), not being promoted makes the self-sacrifice (and so life) seem suddenly worthless. Among other ranks, the effect of promotion (and lack of it) is more directly felt in their day-to-day lives. A corporal is given a room of his own and becomes a member of the corporals' club, and a sergeant joins the inner circle of the sergeants' mess. Promotion affects directly who your friends are and how everybody reacts towards you. In the officers' mess, by

contrast, rank is less important.

Although the British Army does all it can to keep its NCO corps strong (they are the ones who actually fight and win battles), increasingly its best are being siphoned off, promoted to cover officer shortages, peacetime career considerations overriding the need for mature, strong NCOs in war. Sergeants are being promoted younger, partly as an effect of increasing commissioning from the ranks, but also because today's top NCOs are not as prepared as their forebears to wait for promotion. The traditional father-like, older platoon sergeant, who takes his young officer firmly in hand, is more likely today to be commanding the platoon himself, due to a shortage of officers. Young officers are very much affected by this. Fresh from Sandhurst, they find themselves teamed up with a sergeant who may be even younger, and who therefore is less likely to get a grip of them to understand the reality of their responsibilities. The combination of a young sergeant and a freshly commissioned 'rupert' (a common nickname for young second lieutenants) creates extra work for others, particularly the company sergeant major, as inevitably inexperience leads to administrative problems.

Rivalries among NCOs, particularly sergeants, are very much greater than among officers – as young officers invariably discover on social visits to the sergeants' mess. This rivalry extends from winning military competitions and general military accomplishment, to social attributes – in which drinking can play an important part. Young officers invited into the sergeants' mess are required to match drink for drink with the sergeants, usually being judged sympathetically by their willingness and application rather than by the end result.

All young officers arriving at their regiment for the first time are desperately keen to establish credibility with their soldiers. The first vital step is to gain some sort of status and relationship with their platoon sergeant – and the competition involved in this process can be fierce. Not all officers succeed. Those who fail have no choice but to put the experience behind them, and possibly invent another leadership personality for themselves to use when they take up another job with a new group of soldiers.

Officers can choose how to play their relations with NCOs and soldiers. It's possible to be equally successful, by either being completely pukka and unattainable, or by being themselves and meeting NCOs and soldiers at their own level. The latter approach is more difficult, which may be the reason why some officers from comparatively ordinary backgrounds adopt the role of the 'proper' army officer.

Israeli society is aggressively egalitarian, with little room for an aristocracy or the concept of gentle breeding. IDF officers are not

required to be gentlemen, nor to have any sort of social, academic or even educational superiority over their subordinates. The officers themselves place little value on such things, although there is a growing realisation that the sophistication of military technology makes some kind of science degree a prerequisite for officers.[24] Theirs is a very demanding occupation. Conscripts selected for officer training must sign on for at least one extra year of service, and in peacetime officers work particularly long and unsociable hours. They are three to four times more likely than other ranks to become casualties in combat, the inevitable product of the IDF's high profile, 'follow-me' leadership; and they retire earlier than their western counterparts, some (particularly during the war years) exhausted by years of long hours on duty and stress. In return for this significant burden of responsibility, Israeli society accords a very high status to IDF officers, which is a significant motivating factor in becoming one.

Performance in combat is the prime criterion by which the IDF judges its leaders. Apart from those doctors, engineers and other specialists who join at senior level, all officers have served in the ranks and must then have served, and excelled, as NCOs. There is only one route for promotion, from NCO to officer, with nothing like the parallel career structure offered by most other armies – which keep NCOs and officers in two separate castes. As a result, IDF NCOs are notably young and inexperienced. There is no equivalent to the mature, experienced, cautious (and possibly paternal) senior NCO character that exists in most other armies. The IDF officer must therefore be responsible for much of his senior NCOs' work, as well as his own – a burden that British officers rarely have to shoulder.

Israeli Defence Force officers are the survivors of rigorous testing and hard work. After basic training and five months with their units (patrolling, training and on operations) they are graded – by kaba score and their unit commander's evaluation of performance – and must be in the top 50 percent of their intake. Most are then selected for three to four-month NCO leadership courses – considered the toughest in the IDF. Much of the time on these courses is spent on exercise, when they're deprived of sleep, proper food and shelter. They learn leadership and technical military skills, being evaluated as they perform a wide variety of different military jobs.

The training is personal and very intense. For example, on the NCO tank commanders' course, students form tank crews which stay with the same instructors for the duration of the course. The instructors take time to get to know each crew member, determining how to bring out the best in each. The instructors have been carefully selected from the previous batch of conscripts and so are the same age as their pupils. To the students, they are known as 'Gananimm'

(kindergarten teachers).

After these NCO command courses, and a further 6-10 months as team leaders back with their units, all NCOs are considered for their potential as officers. Those with the highest kaba scores (51 to 56) undergo a series of peer ratings, commanders' recommendations and psychological evaluations. Sociability, social intelligence, emotional stability, leadership, devotion to duty, decisiveness and perseverance under stress are measured.[25] Because the IDF officer candidate already has two years of military experience, his training concentrates on human leadership and tactical problems rather than (as at Sandhurst) teaching military skills as well. Tuition comes in the form of practical exercises rather than formal teaching. Student teams discuss problems, plan, and then take turns to lead the exercise operation which results from this process.

Most armies tend to teach conservative tactics so that their students learn the basics thoroughly, while ensuring that from the beginning officers make realistic plans. There is no point in creating a plan so daring or different that soldiers refuse to carry it out.

However the IDF philosophy is very different. Its style of leadership is very clearly defined, characterised by adventurous officers leading from the front, using initiative, improvisation and flexibility rather than going by the book. Officers and NCOs are always the best soldiers in their units, a principle developed from the pre-Independence days of the *Palmach* and *Haganah* (the guerrilla groups which provide the IDF's only military traditions). By leading through personal example (the 'follow-me' style), Israeli officers believe they can 'pull' their men with them into more daring tactical solutions than otherwise might be possible or even prudent. Creative thinking and improvisation is particularly encouraged, stimulated by the instructors who introduce unexpected problems to the field training exercises. In their tactical solutions to problems, IDF officer trainees do not have to conform to text-book tactics, or to what is referred to in the British Army as the 'DS solution' – that is, the procedures laid down by the Directing Staff, who are always right.

The US Army's officer training academy at West Point, like the Soviet Army equivalents, offers an academic as well as a military training. West Point is very different from the British equivalent at Sandhurst in both training and attitude, and, interestingly, is the older of the two. Whereas the Sandhurst motto 'Serve to Lead' is commonly corrupted by cadets into the more achievable 'Skive to Survive', West Pointers are subject to the notorious 'Honor Code', in which a cadet promises that he will not 'lie, cheat or steal, nor tolerate anyone else who does so'. The Honor Code's purpose is to give each cadet the opportunity to live a perfect life for the few years he is under training,

as one US Army captain told me, like a knight of Arthurian legend. In reality, it seems to have upset some as well as ennobled others. Honour has not, for example, deterred notorious examination scandals at West Point – in which incidents of organised cheating have led to savage witch-hunts.

West Point creates a strange elite within the ranks of The US Army officer corps. Its graduates are in a minority compared with the numbers of officers from lesser officer training establishments. Generals like MacArthur were great 'Corpsmen', believing that the Corps of West Point cadets (and its graduates) were the cream, vital to the future of the US Army. They might seem to an outsider to be an equivalent to the officers of the British Army's socially elite regiments. West Pointers do not, however, have the same social exclusivity as British officers are supposed (or assumed) to have. They come from a very wide range of different backgrounds, some being sponsored by Congressmen and a number personally by Congressional Medal of Honor winners (the US equivalent of the Victoria Cross). West Point's elitism is created by the academy itself, and spreads beyond the US Army into business and social circles. The academy homogenises all the various social and cultural backgrounds of each cadet until they pass out as fully-fledged 'West Pointers', of the same stamp, which they will carry for the rest of their lives, inside and outside the US Army. The personal prestige is considerable.

The army is not as integrated into American society, nor as generally socially accepted as in Britain – or certainly in Israel. Since the US Cavalry was sent out to subdue the Sioux and Apache, the army has tended to be based in some of the more remote areas of the USA. (Its Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, in the depths of Kansas, is deliberately located well away from the distractions and fun of city life.) US military 'Forts' are independent, self-contained townships, complete with supermarkets, bowling alleys, churches, petrol stations and so on. As a result, servicemen have no need to become involved with the communities or areas in which they live. They move on posting from one Fort to the next, overseas and at home, like Indian fighters moving through hostile territory. One effect of this isolation is to make joining the US Army a serious psychological burning of bridges, each soldier becoming 'Army' oriented more than in many other armies. But this strong identification can also become a form of psychological inflexibility, which in combat can make the personality brittle and less able to cope.

Vietnam had a severe and damaging effect on the US public's opinion of its armed forces – particularly the army. And more particularly, West Pointers became identified with the keen, career-oriented sort of officer who got his men killed unnecessarily. The

shining armour of the West Point 'Corps of Cadets' was battered and stained by Vietnam, and remained so during the seventies and eighties.

Commanding Officers, particularly of British battalions, wield enormous personal power. They are responsible for everything that happens in their unit, with a great deal of choice in how they exercise their power. In both the Chinese People's Liberation Army, and until 1991 when the Soviet bloc collapsed in the Soviet Army (and other armies based on a communist model), for political reasons command is shared between the commander and his political commissar. Commander and commissar have equal powers but clearly defined areas of responsibility: the commander for training and operational military matters, the commissar for the welfare and morale of the men.

Western commanders regard this sort of duality as one of the worst manifestations of Communism, but in the PLA it appears to work well. Also, the system is not communist in origin, but was created in 1917 to shore up the Russian Imperial Army as it crumbled on the Eastern Front.

The commissar frees the commander from everything but military matters: organising entertainment for the troops, sorting out personal problems, running political meetings and smoothing relations with the civilian population. Jobs of this nature are regarded by most commanders as necessary but irksome, and many western military leaders would actually welcome someone else doing them. Sharing command in this way is however alien to most military people. The military ethos is based upon decisions being made by one person, who then issues orders that subordinates must obey. Having to debate decisions with another person would be a complication fraught with difficulty. In the communist system, disagreements between commander and commissar are supposed to be referred to the unit's Party committee – a further complication. In battle particularly, an unresolved disagreement could be disastrous for the unit as commander and commissar have equal power and status.

Western COs are subjected to the pressures of coping with the problems of the families as well as training and commanding their soldiers. In war their job would be in many ways simpler; a matter of keeping the men fighting. In starting out as a CO, every lieutenant colonel has several fundamental decisions to make, which will affect the rest of his career. To achieve promotion he has toed the line, getting 'Excellent' grades in his confidential reports plus a string of recommendations for command. So now he's 'made it', does he continue to build his career, safeguarding his own future by making the decisions that he knows (or guesses) his superior would want, or

does he do what is best for his battalion? (There will be occasions when these two responsibilities are at odds.) He is father to the unit, but how does he choose to deal with the problems? He can remain aloof, only getting involved when there is a problem, or make himself available and known as a caring person, and so pre-empt problems.

Peacetime COs have very different aims and motives from wartime COs. In peace they command for a fixed period of time. Ambitious men therefore ride their regiments hard for two and a half years, ensuring that everything looks good, so that they do well personally and receive good confidential reports. Some may not be interested in knowing what's really wrong inside their battalions, just so long as their superiors are happy with what they see. Such personal ambition is usually accompanied by the ruthless will to ensure that no mistakes are made that could be blamed on them while they are in command. For peacetime brigade commanders (sweating on getting a clean sheet from their brigades), trouble-free units are clearly preferable; their COs must be reliable and therefore predictable. Some peacetime COs find it much easier to be sociable to superiors while keeping a distance from subordinates. They may even deliberately make their soldiers frightened of them, using their personal power and rank as a weapon of subjugation. One CO told me he did this as part of conditioning his men for combat: 'If they're frightened of me, they won't be frightened of the Russians.'

By contrast, popularity in the Israeli Defence Force is considered a particularly important leadership quality. Popularity is formally measured as a 'peer rating', which includes frank appraisals from all members of the unit. Most pilots (for example) emerge at the end of their training and selection as men who have proved themselves very popular with everyone – almost celebrities. By setting such stock on peer rating, the IDF ensure that their soldiers are led by officers they respect, rather than by those appointed from above. The IDF officer caste is thus not artificially elevated, nor are its leaders and followers distanced from each other in the way the British Army believes necessary.

In war, it's essential that every person in a unit trusts the Commanding Officer. For this trust to develop, the CO must have some kind of sensible and genuine relationship with his officers, NCOs and soldiers. In terms of personal qualities, the basic essential is integrity of character; if a CO is really a shy, aloof person, it cuts no ice for him to pretend he is something different. He must also be honest with his soldiers – 'straight' as they put it. The best wartime COs are genuinely concerned and approachable, but also ruthless enough in battle to force their men to do things they don't want to do.

In good units, the ruthlessness works both ways; Private Nick

Taylor of 2 Para comments on his CO Lt Col 'H' Jones, about when he was killed during the battle for Darwin Goose Green in the Falklands War:

> "'H' Jones wasn't really discussed afterwards. He'd been doing the right thing, the thing we expected of him – doing his job. He knew most people's surnames, and knew most of us pretty well. He talked to us at our level, whereas some of them don't even bother their arses. During the battle, when he was killed, I just thought, 'Tough'".

Some men have a need to be liked. Others are shy. Both these characteristics can create pressure, and cannot be eradicated by military training. The best training can achieve is to force the individual to adopt some kind of defence mechanism to hide what in the army (and in some other careers) are considered personal weaknesses. Problems arise through the behavioural artificiality of the defence mechanisms, which can appear to subordinates as irrational behaviour.

Beyond the rank of lieutenant colonel, isolation from ordinary soldiers and the real military world becomes an increasing problem. Successful commanders in peacetime armies are able to organise things both at unit level dealing with soldiers, and in staff HQs dealing with paperwork. To be promoted to high rank in peacetime, senior officers must be able to run a neat, efficient office, which is a far cry from fighting battles. The prime quality for officers working in headquarters is good organisation, which in the army is judged by producing accurate work on time, and being good with fine detail – the vital 'nitty gritty' of plans. This starts from the very beginning, at Sandhurst where officer cadets are constantly urged to 'pay attention to detail'. Appearances are important too, taken as signs of underlying efficiency: neat handwriting, a tidy desk – some of the indicators psychologist Norman Dixon says point towards obsessional personalities.

It is however entirely reasonable for good organisers, in whatever walk of life, to have clear 'In' and 'Out' trays, to think ahead and to be reliable and predictable. But in the civilian world, the sort of 'good organisation' some senior officers insist on could be regarded as unreasonable and obsessional. Nevertheless, military headquarters are different; doing things exactly to the letter is very important, particularly in war when men's lives depend on getting it right under pressure.

Norman Dixon's theory of increasing obsessional behaviour in military officers as they are promoted, although a generalisation, does however help illustrate what life can be like within military

organisations. He argues that obsessional personalities do well in peacetime; they ensure that things are done exactly correctly, follow orders to the letter, and are very dedicated.

Unfortunately, obsessional people contain within them the seeds of their own destruction. As officers progress up the military tree, the more each job increases in complexity – especially in terms of low-level politics. The pressure builds as well – particularly for the obsessional who cannot do everything himself, but is forced to delegate to others. According to Dixon, he therefore visits his obsessions on subordinates, who are told to do things in exactly the way he would do them himself. Their work never reaches his standards, so the obsessed senior officer spends more time on the backs of his subordinates checking their work than he does working himself, becoming unpopular in the process. Eventually, in his crusade to be better organised (and get himself promoted), the obsessional reaches the point where he cannot cope, ultimately giving up, or becoming depressed and falling ill. It's a no-win situation.

Dixon says that in peacetime, senior officers get to the top through being obsessional; but when obsession gets the better of them, are left stranded beyond their true capabilities. With no other personal abilities to fall back on, such individuals can only struggle, each reaching what Dixon calls 'their own level of incompetence'.

Although as I've already argued, I feel that Dr Dixon exaggerates, there is something of the obsessional in most successful staff officers. In all armies, selection for promotion is through the personal recommendations of superiors. Because obsessionals insist that work be done in exactly the same manner that they themselves would do it, they choose fellow obsessionals, or at least people with similar characteristics to their own, for promotion. Once an officer reaches the rank of brigadier, the generals who decide which brigadiers will become major generals will probably know him well. Promotion to lieutenant general and higher is even more based upon personal knowledge. The top men choose people like themselves as their successors; reliable, neat, logical men, who pay attention to detail.

At the end of a military career, letting go can be difficult. For some, retiring from the army can be very depressing. A former RSM finds himself a nobody in the outside world, suddenly devoid of rank and power, and without any sort of status. Military discipline does not work in Civvy Street; shouting at subordinates is more likely to start a fight than to get the job done. The more military minded an individual has become ('khaki-brained'), the harder it is for him to leave the army. As a result, significant numbers of retiring officers prefer to stay under the military umbrella after retirement age, in underpaid, often mundane, Retired Officer posts.

The peacetime army is a strange, stressful environment, a highly structured society in miniature. When this pressurised society goes off to war, much of its social tension and tribalism becomes irrelevant. In war the only important factor is professional competence. Putting aside the habits of peace at the right time may not be easy.

Isolation is the most damaging psychological enemy of the battlefield, stripping men of courage and the will to continue. In peace, the overriding importance of conforming and the social divisions of the British Army, particularly within its officer caste, can create unpleasant situations for particular individuals. In war these divisions could make people feel terribly alone, and so create serious problems. Because social division is not considered a problem by most people in the British Army, individuals become used to coping with it. Most would not be prepared to admit even to being aware of it. In war, when the psychological pressures increase and comradeship becomes essential for survival, those of the same social level would feel confident enough to confide in their equals, dispelling their own fears by talking about them. The outsiders however have nobody to whom they can turn and could therefore become psychiatric casualties. The British Army's regimental system is a wonderful source of comradeship and motivation for its card-carrying members, but can slam the door in the face of those who for one reason or another are outsiders.

An Army psychiatrist, pondering the motives of ambitious officers, comments (in a rather wild generalisation) on what he feels is a basic part of Army psychology:

> "The Army is all about power and privilege. Shouting is encouraged, starting from the parade square, extending into all aspects of army life. There's also the staff cars, commanders' houses, house staff, perks et cetera… It can't be because of the money…"

The personal power of military commanders is far greater than that enjoyed by civilian employers. This power must however be used for purely military purposes, and should not be translated across into ordinary life. Status goes with rank and appointment, Commanding Officers in particular being given a whole package of privileges that emphasise the singularity of their position. Military commanders become adept at exercising personal power, using their official authority to manipulate others into getting the job done. Many feel a sense of anti-climax on leaving the Forces, not only leaving the military family, but losing a whole raft of status, position and authority.

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*Front cover photograph*: The Author during Operation Brewers Arms in May 1982.

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**notes**

# Endnotes

# 1

Gunner is the lowest rank in the Royal Artillery, similar to ‘Sapper’ in the Royal Engineers, and ‘Trooper’ in armoured regiments.

# 2

I do now. Mr AAF Modey of Ferndown was kind enough to write to tell me that Mexe stands for the ‘Military Engineering Experimental Establishment’, at Christchurch, where also they first built the Royal Engineers’ Bailey Bridge.

# 3

By 2007, the SBS was once more a ‘Service’ rather than a ‘Squadron’, and approaching the size of the SAS.

Landing Craft Medium – a flat-bottomed assault craft capable of carrying two Landrovers.

# 5

Unknown to us at that time, Royal Navy nuclear submarines were stationed at various points along the Argentine approach routes reporting their movements, supplemented at various times by Special Forces teams and other agencies able to monitor activities at Argentine air bases. Suffice it to say that the Fleet received timely and accurate warning of Argentine air attacks, which were not always heeded as well as they should have been.

# 6

I couldn't measure how fast they were actually flying – but I'd guess them to have been flat out. The A4 Douglas Sky Hawk's top speed was 675mph.

# 7

FLYCO – Flight Commander of Intrepid's support Helicopter operation, flight deck and air traffic control.

Confirmed by General John Stanier in *War and the Media* p. 176.

# 9

Kelp – a floating seaweed, often hundreds of feet long, that clogs up many inlets in the Falklands. The islanders collect and use it for fertilizer and food, hence their nickname ‘Kelpers’.

# 10

Years later I was able to confirm that this was one of the Argentine "*Red de Observadores a Ellas*," civilian volunteers, possibly from their secret services, positioned with a radio amid hills outside normal radar cover. Falkland Islanders' radios were confiscated and given to these observers, who for a while were very effective directing Argentine air attacks on British ships in San Carlos.

# 11

Deeply, deeply boring names… for example the Americans called initial operation of Gulf War One, Operation “Desert Shield” – protecting Saudi Arabia and Bahrain from invasion. When the bombing started, it became “Desert Storm”. The British name for all this excitement was “Operation Granby”…

# 12

I met Bob Harmes at a 25th anniversary reunion dinner in summer 2007. He took me to one side and said: “I always meant to tell you how bad I felt coming over to Intrepid to tell you to go out on that Beagle Ridge mission. I could see you were all knackered, and I certainly wouldn’t have wanted to go on that one. But you got on with it, and I wanted to say that I think you a really good operator.” This little aside very greatly heartened me, especially after all those years.

# 13

I much later discovered that this odd and extremely risky mission was ordered by General Jeremy Moore's newly-arrived divisional HQ staff, probably after former Falklands Police Chief Terry Peck had reached British lines and been debriefed. Terry had quit Stanley several weeks earlier and infiltrated his way through Argentine lines to join up with the Paras. This was indistinct and very out-of-date intelligence, which Peter Manley had told me before we were inserted onto Beagle Ridge, referred to the location of the Argentine general. Afterwards, the official history "*The Royal Navy and the Falklands War*" p 312, reduces the importance of the target to "Argentine military intelligence officers", adding that the first missile malfunctioned, exploding near the Argentine hospital ship – which is not what we observed. In my book "*Forgotten Voices Falklands*", General Menendez himself says he moved around frequently to avoid becoming the target of any MI6 or Special Forces assassination teams. General Moore had earlier ordered a gun battery and commando company to be flown to the north of Stanley to fire upon Argentine aircraft using the airfield. Thankfully this was left to Brigadier Julian Thompson, who decided the huge risk and logistical effort not worth any potential benefit (p344, Forgotten Voices Falklands *ibid*). I suspect FO1 was ordered onto Beagle Ridge *in lieu* of this artillery battery.

All this information as supplied by the Argentinians, including their spelling.

7.62mm GPMGs in ‘Sustained Fire’ mode, mounted on tripods with spare heavy-duty barrels, firing sustained bursts as opposed to the short bursts of the more portable mode.

# 16

M. Rosenberg, *Occupation and Values*; see Norman F. Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* (London, 1979), p. 401.

# 17

Anthony Beevor, *Inside the British Army* (London, 1990), p. 55; the example is of a late-entry captain and his family.

Both were promoted from major to major general in peacetime. Progression in peacetime to higher ranks is very much more politic.

# 19

Sydney Jary, *18 Platoon* (Carshalton Beeches, 1987), p. 117.

# 20

R. G. L. von Zugbach, Power and Prestige in the British Army (Aldershot, 1988), p. 93.

# 21

Zugbach, pp. 68, 70.

# 22

Zugbach, p. 66.

# 23

Zugbach, p. 103, table.

# 24

Reuvan Gal, *A Portrait of the Israeli Soldier* (New York, 1986), p. 128.

# 25

Gal, p. 119.